スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑰

小さな濃いメロディ

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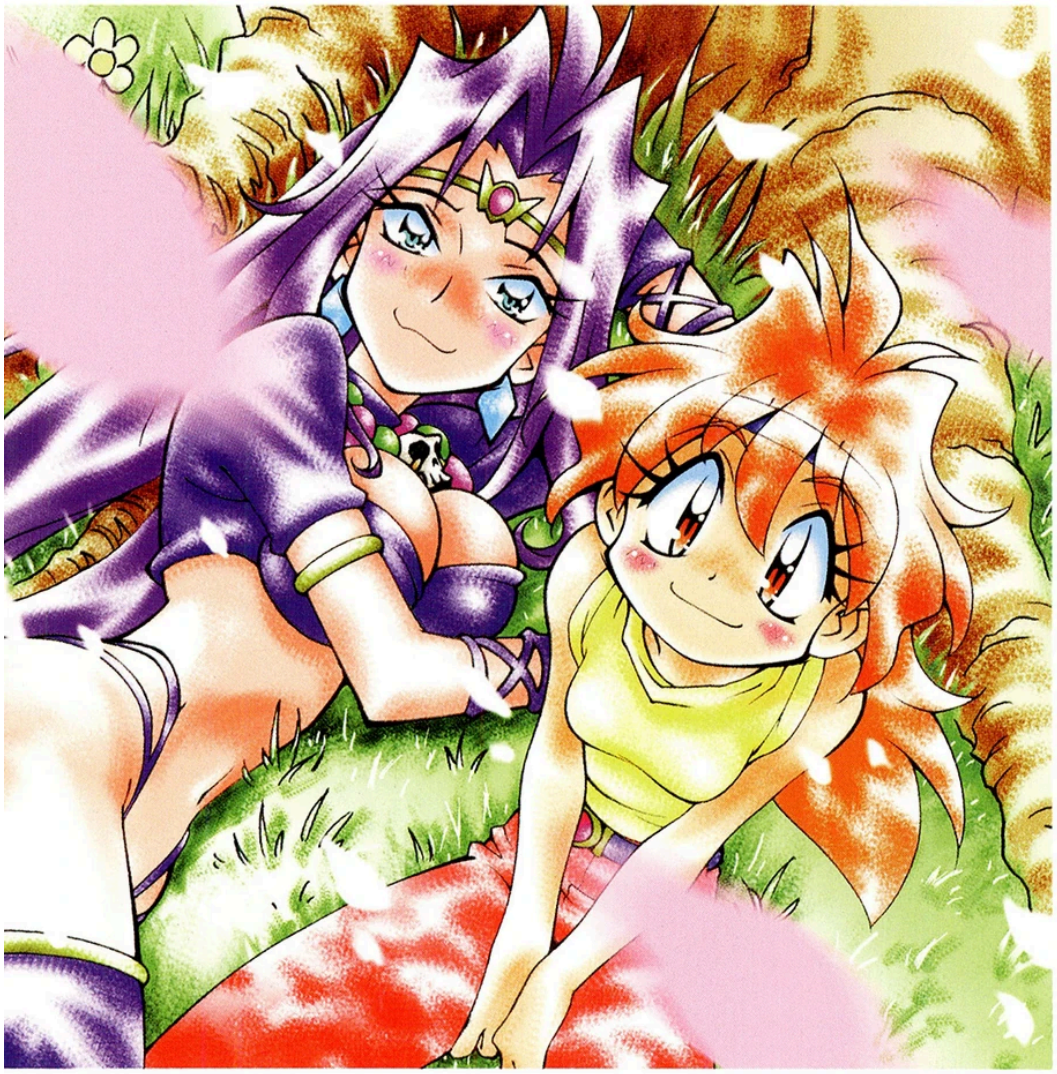

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Slayers Special Volume 17

A Small but Rich Melody

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

A Small but Rich Melody (Part 1)

"There's nothing left to worry about!"

My voice rang out across the diner, loud and proud.

—A small, nameless village. A little while earlier.

I had stopped in for a meal, dressed in my usual mage's getup, when the village headman spotted me and came over. Apparently some goblins had been terrorizing the village and he wanted me to deal with them. I turned him down flat, naturally. Too much hassle. Hardly worth the coin.

But then—

When I finished eating and stepped out onto the highway, who should appear right in front of me but that same band of goblins. Needless to say, one spell and they were scattered. I turned back around to the diner and made my announcement to the headman—still sitting there clutching his head—and to the other patrons.

Now, here's the key point. If I'd been dumb enough to say, "Oh, I just happened to run into them and blasted them. So, my fee?"—there was a very real risk he'd come back with, "You already refused the job. No pay for you." Hence my approach.

"...I said what I said before, but I couldn't stop thinking about it, y'know? I took care of those goblins for you."

"OOOHHHHH!"

The room erupted in admiration. The old headman shuffled over to me, moved to tears.

"Thank you... thank you! You really are everything I hoped—just as I knew you would be!"

"Oh, please... and honestly, just half the agreed fee is fine. I did refuse at first, after all."

The ultimate attack: make it look like a concession while actually billing them! When you phrase it that way, almost no one—short of a truly ruthless merchant—can say no. They don't even realize they're being charged.

"Oh... how selfless!"

The headman was clearly one of those people.

"What nobility... the whole village will never forget you! Lady Tina!"

...He got my name wrong immediately. I'd be forgotten in three days at this rate.

"...Sorry. It's Lina. Lina Inverse."

"—Lina Inverse, did you say!?"

The gasp didn't come from the headman in front of me, but from a customer at a table across the room. Long silver hair. A resonant voice. Dressed in a smart white outfit, with a small lute resting near the pack at his feet. Taken on its own, that painted a perfectly reasonable picture of a stylish travelling bard—but the raw material, a stocky man pushing forty, somehow undermined the whole effect.

...Frankly, he looked terrifying.

"Do you know her?" the headman asked.

"But of course!" the man answered, and with a theatrical air he rose from his seat, lute in hand, gave it a single strum—

...Pliiing...

—and spoke in a sonorous, half-sung voice:

"—Lina Inverse. Renowned travelling mage. A few more years hence, and she will be legend—"

He gave another strum, offered a little bow, and said:

"—Forgive my tardiness in introducing myself. I am Eugene Violetta. A humble bard, as you see."

What a terrible name for someone who looked like THAT.

"To meet someone of your storied reputation in a place like this—what an honor. Surely this is fate. Would you permit me to sing a song in your honor?"

"Er...?"

A song... well... regardless of this guy's looks, being asked by a bard to sing about you wasn't exactly unpleasant.

"I... I mean, that's kind of embarrassing," I said, scratching my cheek.

"You'll allow it?"

"...S-sure, I guess..."

"—Very well—"

Pliiing... He drew his fingers across the strings and began to sing with great flair.

Oh, Lina, Lina Inverse,
Wielder of uncounted powers,
Your name rings out across the world.
With noble brow held high,
Your hair flows like living flame—
A goddess of battle, she!

But those who hoped for such a sight,

Who saw the real thing? Slight disappointment!

BAHAHAHAHAHA!

"HOLD ON A MINUTE!"

The other patrons burst out laughing. I immediately called a halt.

"...What is it?" Eugene asked, lifting his fingers from the strings with an innocent look.

"What IS it?! You said you were going to PRAISE me! You don't get to add a punchline!"

"Ohh! What do you mean, Lady Lina!"

He struck an absurdly dramatic pose of dismay.

"A personage as famous as yourself suffers endlessly from rumor and prejudice! The image people have of Lina Inverse is either a battle-goddess of divine majesty, or a terrifying demonic figure. But the real you is different. Genuinely charming—a perfectly ordinary girl."

"...Oh... um... well..."

When someone put it that way, I couldn't feel bad about it exactly.

"Furthermore, I have even heard rumors that impostors dare use your name. For that very reason—I wish to sing not a painted ideal smothered in false flattery, but the truth of who you are. That opening verse serves a dual purpose: it draws the audience in with laughter, and it shatters the false images that have built up around you."

"...Oh... I see..."

"May I continue, then?"

With a warm smile, he resumed.

Oh, Lina, Lina Inverse,
With your acorn eyes and childlike face,
Tiny in stature, low in proportion,
Your chest is almost nothing at all—
Perhaps you'd benefit from some padding?

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!"

I stopped him again.

"What is it this time?"

"Look, I get the concept behind this song... but I'm coming across as some kind of comedy character! And that last verse felt downright spiteful!"

"What do you mean? You are more than sufficiently beautiful. Taste varies from person to person. I, for one, find women who are needlessly buxom or excessively alluring to be rather off-putting. What I find truly appealing is a girl with a certain freshness—say, around ten years of age—"

"...That's just a lo—"

"I'll continue," he said, cutting off my retort and resuming his playing.

...Hmm... something about this guy made me feel like I should arrest him now, before he actually committed a crime. Was I overthinking it?

Oh, Lina, Lina Inverse,
The first time I met her,
She was earning small change defeating goblins—
A baby-faced, toddler-built Lina Inverse.

...Pliing...

"—That concludes my song."

"THAT WAS NOT PRAISE!"

KRAK-BOOOM!

My furious attack spell blew Eugene—along with the rest of the patrons—clean across the room.

The night castle stood tall and silent in the dark. The residence of Lord Tirando, on the outskirts of Quarland City. A quick scan from outside suggested minimal guards. Getting in should be easy.

Right. My current job: infiltrate the castle and retrieve certain items.

That might sound like thievery—but it was nothing of the sort. This was a legitimate commission from the Sorcerers' Guild.

Apparently Lord Tirando was a collector—a man who loved interesting things—who occasionally visited the Guild to admire their magical artifacts. No problem there. But whenever something caught his eye, he'd say he was "borrowing" it, take it home, and never return it. The kind of person you find everywhere. The trouble was his rank as a lord, and the fact that what he was taking was worth quite a bit of money. Magical artifacts aren't cheap, no matter how unimpressive they look or how silly their effects. And sometimes a seemingly useless device turns out to be exactly what you need.

Ask him to return something and he'd say, "Just a little longer," or "I'm not sure where it went," or even, "Oh, what does it matter?" The Guild was stuck. Talking hadn't worked. Making replacements from scratch would be prohibitively expensive. Going to the king could make things messier. So when I happened to pass through town, the commission came my way: recover the items. If the infiltration was discovered, the

Guild could claim no involvement since I wasn't local. And magical knowledge meant I could identify the right items.

The fee—including a healthy "silence bonus"—was reasonable. I took the job.

"Infiltrating a castle" sounds death-defying, but this lord's carelessness meant minimal guards, and I'd been given a rough layout of the building. As long as I didn't make any stupid mistakes, this was easy money.

Sure enough, even from outside, the security was laughable. I circled to the side of the castle and murmured a spell—

"—Levitation—"

—and floated up into the night sky. Moon and stars behind me, I drifted over the castle wall and descended into the grounds. Even the courtyard was mostly empty. According to my information, the treasury should be in the basement accessible from the rear entrance.

I floated around back and found a small wooden door with a soldier posted on each side. I landed in the shadows a short distance away and cast a spell.

"Sleep."

"...Nngh..."

"...Yawn..."

The two guards slumped to the ground snoring, without ever realizing a spell had been cast. Excellent. At this rate, getting the items would be a cinch!

I was about to step out from the shadows when, at that very moment—

...Pliiing...

From behind me. A soft, flowing sound.

> *Cradled by the stars, she crosses the wall,*
> *The spell that forms upon her lips*
> *Lulls the soldiers into slumber,*
> *And where her tiptoes lead*
> *A night-black castle waits.*

—What—?!

I spun around. Standing there was the middle-aged bard I'd met in that village not long ago. Of course it was.

UGH, NOT HIM!?

His jarring, unsettling appearance was almost enough to make me scream—even more so in the dead of night.

"Oh my. It has been a while, Lina."

His unnaturally white teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

"...Wh... wha... YOU!?"

"Hahaha. Surely you haven't forgotten me? It's Eugene. Eugene Vio—"

"SHHH!"

I cut him off frantically. "I'm in the middle of a secret mission! I can't be noticed! Do you understand?! So keep it DOWN!"

Eugene nodded with a look of understanding. "I see. In that case, I shall accompany you without strumming my lute or raising my voice."

"Fine, then—"

I almost nodded—then caught myself.

"W-wait a minute! Accompany me—WHY?!"

"Heh. Isn't it obvious?" He reached for his lute reflexively, stopped himself, and said: "Every bard aspires to write a poem that will endure through the ages. And I have met you—the renowned Lina Inverse. This is fate. A divine sign from the god of poetry that I should follow you, witness your deeds, sing your praises, and by doing so become famous as the one who told your legend."

"BURY THAT GOD! Getting famous by riding someone's coattails is not 'becoming famous'! Besides, you tagging along everywhere is nothing but a nuisance! ...And don't tell me you're planning to turn THIS into a song too..."

"Of course. I intend to sing it to the world."

"ARE YOU AN IDIOT?! I said this is a SECRET MISSION! What's the point of telling the world?!"

"That's simply the nature of a bard."

"'Nature' is not good enough! Just DON'T sing it!"

"I ask for your consideration."

"No! If you insist, I'll knock you out right here and make sure you can't follow!"

"...Hmm... if you put it that way, I have no choice... If I sing, you stop me. If I don't sing, I may come along. Understood."

"...Huh? Wait—"

"I will not sing about this incident. I am using it solely for reference—to better understand Lina Inverse as a person. So let's press on. The guards could wake up."

"...But..."

I started to object—then let out a long breath. Fine. I knew this type. Nothing would get through to him. I could knock him out—but the commotion might alert the guards, and that would be entirely counterproductive.

"...Alright, then. Let's go."

If we get caught, I'm using him as a decoy and running. I swore it silently as I headed for the back entrance.

The corridor beyond was dim, wall lamps casting a faint glow and a faint smell of burning tallow. No sign of anyone. The guards were supposedly lax, but this was almost unsettling—careless enough to make me wonder if it was a trap. Eugene followed a few paces back, footsteps muffled, just as cautious.

Before long, a door appeared on the left—exactly as the Guild's information described. This should open into a descending staircase, with a straight passage leading to the treasury at the end. No one seemed to be directly on the other side, but there had to be guards in front of the treasury. Open this door and it was a straight shot—easy to be spotted.

So—I murmured another spell.

"Sleep."

I cast it and pressed my ear to the door, listening.

...Thump. Thump.

Two soft, heavy sounds from somewhere below. Good. The guards were probably asleep. The door was unlocked, and I stepped through and descended the stairs. At the bottom—exactly what I expected: two soldiers slumped in front of the treasury door, sleeping soundly. Just in case they woke, I tied their hands and feet with rope from my pocket and gagged them.

Ahead stood the treasury door. This one had a lock—a massive iron hasp and a heavy, crude padlock. But a childish lock like that was nothing to me.

"Now then..."

I fished two pieces of wire from my pocket, worked them into the keyhole—

...Click.

With a small metallic sound, the lock came open with almost no effort. Behind me I heard Eugene let out a small soft breath of admiration.

I removed the hasp and opened the door to—darkness. Well, of course. An unmanned treasury wouldn't have lights burning. I murmured another spell.

"Light."

...Fwomp...

A mage-light blazed to life, flooding the room with brightness. And then—radiance filled the air. In the not-very-large treasury, gold and silver, gems and fine crafts, treasures of every description were crammed onto every available surface.

Plink-a-plink, plink-a-plink, plink-a-pliiink—
The light of born magic gleams
On gold and silver, gems and art,
Lighting up a hoard of treasure!
With so much here,
Surely one piece
Stolen wouldn't even be noticed!

"DON'T JUST START SINGING!"

THWACK!

"GBLRK!?"

My spinning kick caught Eugene right in the face just as he struck up his lute and started belting out his song. The nerve! I thought he was being quiet!

"What did I say about no singing and no noise?!"

"Heh. My apologies."

Eugene brushed his hair back with an absurdly misplaced air of cool.

"I had never seen such treasures before. The sheer beauty overwhelmed me. It was a spinal reflex."

"A SPINAL REFLEX?! Anyway—not another peep!"

"Heh. Understood."

He nodded and fell silent—

"...Did you hear something? Really?"

"It sounded like singing..."

Into that silence crept footsteps and soldiers' voices.

We've been found ALREADY?!

"RUN!"

"What? Couldn't we just put them to sleep again?"

"That spell doesn't work on people who are already agitated! Mission failed! Run unless you want to get caught!"

"R-right!"

Eugene spun and bolted. I followed a half-step behind. But—

"Someone's in there!"

Only a few steps in, soldiers came pouring down the stairs. We walked right into them!?

Eugene stopped dead. The soldiers surged toward us. But—I had a plan. I'd already finished casting.

"Azure Shatter Blast!"

I leapt out from behind Eugene and unleashed the spell! A wave of blue light sliced through the corridor, hitting the lined-up soldiers one after another!

"GURK—GAAHHH!?"

A storm of overlapping screams. The spell wasn't lethal, but it was plenty strong enough to knock someone unconscious. The soldiers tumbled down in a heap, blocking the passage and stopping the men behind them.

While they were tangled up, I cast again—

"Earth Gnome's Path!"

I slammed my palm against the wall and triggered the tunneling spell. Stone—and then the earth beyond it—contracted as if recoiling, and a tunnel yawned open, leading straight up. At the far end: night sky. I rattled off the next incantation at speed!

"Levitation!"

I grabbed Eugene's hand and we shot up together into the starlit sky.

"This is troubling..."

In a room at the Sorcerers' Guild, old Guild Chairman Brook sounded genuinely deeply troubled. Not that I had to ask why. It was because of My failure to retrieve the items.

"...Sorry... there was an unexpected variable..."

At my words, the Chairman glanced at the floor nearby.

"When you say 'unexpected variable'... do you mean that object currently lying on the floor?"

At the end of his gaze was a rolled-up blanket, tied shut. Eugene was inside, which was a minor detail.

"What?!" I jumped at his words. "Throw it in a river to let this whole mess 'wash away,' you say!?"

"MMMMMPH!"

"I didn't say anything of the sort."

My inspired suggestion prompted an indignant muffled groan from gagged Eugene and even made the Chairman edge slightly backward.

"...Got it. Next time I'll properly retrieve the right items—"

"No, that's not the issue, Lady Lina."

The Chairman shook his head with a gloomy expression.

"Early this morning, a message arrived from the castle... Last night, a thief broke in. The intruder used magic. And so—they've asked the Sorcerers' Guild to provide security and search for the culprit."

"Oh? Well, good luck with that."

"You can't just say 'good luck with that'! Now the castle's guard will tighten! If we try to recover the items under those conditions, we'll take all the blame! What do you expect me to do?!"

"Honestly... this is perfect."

"HOW IS IT PERFECT?!"

He was genuinely shouting. I frowned.

"...Please tell me you didn't tell that messenger, 'Certainly, we'll handle it,' without even thinking..."

"As an honest and straightforward person, what else could I possibly say?!"

"...And what are they paying for the security work?"

"Oh, nothing was mentioned."

He said it with his chest puffed out. Oh no.

"YOU FOOL!"

I let out an involuntary shriek.

"Being honest and straightforward is NOT the same as accepting everything anyone says! Now listen! You're going to go to the castle, tell them you're there to 'discuss security arrangements,' and get an audience with the lord! And when you do, demand that in exchange for providing security, all the magical items he's taken be returned immediately—plus payment for the security work itself! That's called NEGOTIATION! Oh, and absolutely no 'pay us after the job is done'! It's 'security begins only after all magical items have been returned'!"

"But... even if I said that, there's no way that lord would simply hand things over..."

"Of course not! So here's what you say: 'If word were to reach His Majesty's ears that a thief managed to penetrate your defenses, that would be rather damaging to your reputation, wouldn't it?'"

"That's blackmail!"

"It's NEGOTIATION!"

Okay, it was mostly blackmail.

"What if it backfires and my head ends up on a spike?!"

Not my head, so perfectly fine by me! I swallowed that response and said:

"Don't worry! If they cry blackmail, deny it—say something like, 'Oh, heaven forbid! We merely wish to maintain a long and cordial relationship with the lord. But there are those within the Guild who harbor certain resentment over the matter of the magical items. Were such a person to speak carelessly—in ways that might somehow reach His Majesty—we would find it deeply unfortunate. That is precisely why we wish to resolve this resentment first, by asking for the items' return.' Then steer the conversation from there!"

"OHHH!"

His eyes lit up.

"Magnificent! ...Would you perhaps be willing to go and handle the negotiation yourself?"

"DON'T MAKE THIS SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM! Besides, I have something I need to take care of."

"Something you need to take care of? Once the negotiation with the lord succeeds, recovering the items won't even be necessary..."

"That's not what I mean. If things stay as they are, I could end up doing endless pointless security work for this castle. So I need to provide something."

"...Provide what?"

I gave him a wink.

"The culprit."

The treetops stirred in the night wind, the whole forest swaying and rippling like some enormous living creature. Clouds hid the moonlight; only the faintest starlight filtered down through the leaves. In what should have been near-total darkness, there was light—scattered campfires. A gang of bandits—drinking, laughing, hollering—

"Fireball."

KRAK-WHOOM!

"NGYAAAAH?!"

My spell sent them flying.

"—Wh—WHAT?!"

"What's happening?!"

"And another fireball."

BWOOMF!

"GLRAAAUGH?!"

A second blast and most of the bandits were down and not getting up. Heh. Pushovers.

"—What the hell are you doing, just showing up like this?!"

One of the lucky survivors snarled at me as I walked forward.

"Last night. I'm looking for the person who broke into Lord Tirando's castle."

"The castle?! I don't know anything about any castle!"

"Then where were you last night at around this time?"

"Right here drinking with my crew!"

He answered instantly. Which meant—no alibi outside his own gang!

"Congratulations! You have just been formally designated as the culprit!"

"HOLD IT! What do you mean, 'just been designated'?! That's a frame-up! I'm telling you I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Being a bandit is crime enough!"

I shot back. The lack of self-awareness on some people...

"Anyway! The constitution clearly states that criminals have no rights, so you have no grounds to complain!"

"When did the constitution say THAT?!"

"Probably around yesterday!"

"DON'T LIE TO ME!"

"Obviously I'm lying!"

We glared at each other. Then, at that moment—

...Pliiing, plink-a-plink...

The sound of a lute came from out of nowhere beside us.

Is that middle-aged minstrel still alive!? What on earth is the health department doing!? Next time, will Lina be able to properly finish off Eugene!? ...Eh? The incident...? —Well, setting aside such trivial matters that the author probably hasn't even thought about. Next time: "Small, Intense Melody" (Part 2) Look forward to it in your own time!

(A Small but Rich Melody: To Be Continued)

A Small but Rich Melody (Part 2)

"Fireball, NOW!"

KRAK-WHOOM!

Without hesitation. My attack spell hit the bushes to my right—the direction the sound had come from—and scattered flame and light in all directions. Mixed into the wind came the scorched smell of burning leaves. But there was no impact. Dammit! I missed!?

...Pliiing...

The sound of a lute came from slightly farther away.

"Hahaha. Did I startle you, Lady Lina? Have no fear. It is I. Eugene Vio—"

"ANOTHER fireball!"

KRAK-BOOM!

The second shot without hesitation mowed down the surrounding bushes—and one bandit.

But the voice came again, from yet another direction.

"It is I, Lady Lina. Eugene."

I KNOW IT'S YOU—THAT'S WHY I'M ATTACKING! I screamed internally. The nerve of that Guild Chairman! I had taken such care to quietly wrap Eugene up and leave him behind at the Guild—and instead of doing the sensible thing and burying him or sinking him somewhere, the man had to go and accidentally set him free?! What kind of upbringing did he have?!

Regardless, it was abundantly clear that getting involved with this person never led anywhere good. The logical conclusion: mistake him for a bandit and return him to the earth right here and now!

A presence stirred to the right!

"There! Ice Bolt!"

KA-KRAK-KRINGG!

My spell hit its target dead-on and froze it solid—

"...Tch. Just an ordinary bandit..."

I muttered, and in that same moment—silently. A light and a presence materialized behind me.

—What—?!

I spun around. Illuminated by the glow of magical light stood the middle-aged bard, Eugene Violetta.

Dammit! That magical light was obviously something he'd conjured himself—but with his face lit up this clearly, I couldn't very well knock him over doing here"by mistake."

Reluctantly, I abandoned any further attacks on Eugene.

"Oh, it's just you, Eugene. I thought you were a bandit and almost got confused."

"That was entirely too flat a delivery, Lady Lina. And just now you said something like 'just an ordinary bandit'..."

"Well, setting aside the part that could affect your continued existence—what are you doing here?"

"That could affect my continued existence?! And I'm being called a 'detail'... I'm tempted to push back on that... but the look in your eyes right now is kind of terrifying, so I'll just answer. What am I doing here? Observing your activities to put into song, of course!"

Bliing. He gave the lute a meaningless strum. He glanced at the charred bandit lying nearby.

"...And speaking of which... you were just asking that man whether he had broken into a castle last night... what's going on?"

"In short—as I'm sure you overheard from inside the blanket—the lord asked the Sorcerers' Guild to guard his castle. But running an endless pointless guard shift isn't useful. If the culprit gets caught, though, there's no need to keep it up."

"Oh. I see." Eugene gave a thoughtful plink on the lute instead of snapping his fingers.

"So you're fabricating a culprit."

"Don't say fabricating! It sounds terrible!"

My perfectly valid protest prompted Eugene to look oddly troubled.

"...Then how would you prefer I phrase it...?"

"...Hmm..." I thought for a moment. "Something like... designating a culprit proxy..."

"That still seems rather... problematic... it's still a crime either way."

"Oh, shut it! Would you actually prefer the real culprits stay uncaught and the guard duty drags on indefinitely?!"

"..."

My point landed with a small, pained sound from him.

"...No... well... 'designating a culprit proxy.' I find that has a poetic ring to it, actually." I gave a nod, glanced at the fallen bandit nearby, and said, "Perfect. In that case, could you carry him into town for me?"

"WHAT?!"

Ignoring Eugene's shriek, I turned on my heel and walked away.

The night castle blazed with dozens of torches. About a quarter of those standing guard were mages dispatched by the Sorcerers' Guild. The Chairman had apparently negotiated with the lord and secured the return of most of the magical items on the spot; the Guild was now cooperating with the castle's security operation.

Combined soldiers and mages, more than twice the numbers from two nights ago—but that level of security would be manageable.

"...Right... time to get moving..."

In a back alley some distance from the castle, I murmured the words. My plan was as follows:

Disguised in a loose black outfit—the classic assassin look—with body, face, and hair all concealed so even my gender would be unclear, I would infiltrate the castle and get caught on purpose. I'd lead the pursuit outside the castle gates and into the city toward a designated meeting point, where Eugene would be waiting with our "culprit proxy"—the bandit, dressed the same as me. I'd swap out with the bandit, and then Eugene would present him to the guards with a cheery "I caught this one!" and the whole thing would be wrapped up neatly.

The Chairman knew the plan, but the other Guild mages didn't. They'd chase me in earnest. A bit of care would be needed—but as long as I didn't get careless, I could manage!

"Levitation!"

I cast the spell and rose into the night sky. Following the same route as before to cross the castle wall—and at that very moment!

A killing intent appeared out of nowhere!

Looking over I saw, atop the castle wall, a mage in black robe and black hood—eye on me and already in the middle of casting a spell!

I've been spotted immediately?! This was Bad! This levitation spell had terrible mobility in the air—I had no idea what spell they were casting, but there was no way to dodge it normally!

So—!

"Flame Arrow!"

The instant the mage released their spell, I canceled mine and dropped down onto the top of the castle wall from one floor's height up. The magical flames the mage had conjured sailed harmlessly over my head.

And then—

"Intruder! An intruder has come!"

The mage's cry rang out and the castle erupted into noise.

"Where?! Where?!"

"Up there! On the wall!"

I deliberately looked a little flustered, muttered my next spell as I ran, and sprinted along the top of the wall toward the main gate. Soldiers came running after me. Good enough!

"—Wind Seal—"

If they heard my voice they might notice the gender mismatch with our decoy bandit. I whispered the spell and launched myself off the wall into open air! A high-speed flight spell. Wrapped in a wind barrier, I raced through the sky at considerable speed.

I could have escaped right then and there, but that would defeat the purpose. I controlled the spell and landed on a road near the castle gate outside the walls.

"There she is!"

"Over there! After her!"

Once I'd confirmed the soldiers appeared behind me, I sprinted into the city. I kept just the right distance from my pursuers as I made straight for the rendezvous point with Eugene. I'd been bracing for the Guild mages to attack me with spells from behind—but only soldiers were giving chase.

...Hm... thinking about it, mages generally aren't built for physical endurance. They'd probably dropped out the moment "running" was on the menu. Lucky, or just sad...

Regardless, I raced through the empty streets, rounded a corner, and arrived at the meeting point!

There, dressed in the same outfit as me, the bandit—and Eugene in his usual clothes—

...

...weren't there!!

Wait, what?! That wasn't the plan!

I looked frantically around. This was definitely the right place—I'd confirmed it multiple times in person.

"...Hey...! Where are you?!"

I called quietly—no one appeared.

...What on earth...?

As I stood there bewildered—

"There she is!"

Voices and footsteps from behind. Bad!

I muttered a spell—

"Levitation!"

—and kicked off the ground as the spell launched me upward. But—

"—That's far enough—"

The voice came from the rooftop above. Half by reflex I canceled the spell and landed on the roof, turning toward the voice.

There was—how had they gotten here?—the mage I'd spotted on the castle wall!

"You won't escape... thief. Don't think you're the only one with a flight spell."

So they'd been tracking me from the air. Makes sense.

"Prepare yourself!"

They began casting. The spell was—Flame Arrow?! For all that posturing, a rather underwhelming spell. Still learning situational judgment too. I could just knock them flat—but they were a Guild mage who hadn't been told the situation. Better to show a little mercy.

I murmured quickly under my breath—

"Flame Arrow!"

One flame arrow materialized in front of the mage—while simultaneously my own spell completed. Voicelessly, naturally. Water Creation—a simple water-conjuring spell, roughly a pitcher's worth. It materialized directly above the mage's head.

SPLASH!

It drenched the mage from head to foot, naturally.

"Fool! You thought a little water could extinguish a magical flame?!"

The mage scoffed and launched the Flame Arrow. But I was decent in close combat too. Even on an unstable rooftop, dodging a single flame arrow while continuing to cast wasn't difficult.

And then—

"Ice Arrow!"

I pulled back the power and manifested just two chilled arrows, aimed them at the mage—and shot them into the roof beside where they stood.

"Fool! What are you aiming at?!"

As the mage laughed, I eased slightly backward. The mage moved to close the distance—and slipped.

"WHOOOOAAA?!"

With a shriek, they lost their footing and skidded off the wet-frozen roof—CRASH!—landing right in the middle of the assembled guards below!

Instant chaos.

"Whoa whoa whoa?!"

"What's happening?!"

"Is it the intruder?!"

"It's the intruder!"

"No! This one is one of our guards—!"

Heh. How foolish. From the moment they couldn't read that my aim was to freeze the wet roof and collapse their footing, the outcome was decided.

The obstacle was gone. I cast one more spell—

"Wind Seal!"

This time for real—I used the high-speed flight spell and broke free of my pursuers at last.

...Pliing... Pliing...

> *The night wind cuts cold as needles,*
> *The shining moon eyes the world with frosty calm,*
> *In the waiting dark,*
> *My heartbeat rises—*
> *And at last my feet take the road home—*

"—So, if I'm following this correctly—"

In a room at some inn, after listening to Eugene's excuse-in-song, I smiled pleasantly.

"You were waiting alone, got lonely and scared, and just... headed back to the inn?"

Pliing... "Heh. I suppose if one were to describe it in rather unpoetic terms, that would be accurate."

One strum, and Eugene spoke with his customary flourish. Flat on his back with my foot pressing down on his spine.

After shaking off my pursuers earlier, I'd headed to Eugene's inn and found him strumming his lute and merrily singing something that went "Farewell, Lina, off to prison"—and I had stepped on him from behind. That was the situation.

"So? What happened to our sleeping culprit-proxy?"

"Hmm... I abandoned him and left the scene, so... I imagine he woke up and slipped away somewhere."

"And anyway! Why did you suddenly get scared?! You're not a child!"

"—Well—"

"No singing it. Just explain."

I spotted his hand reaching for the lute and got ahead of it.

"...Mmnh... mmmmh...! Well... I suppose one might say that the impulses that well forth from deep within one's soul are not something that can be suppressed by something as deceitful as 'reason'... I would like you to understand at the very least that what I feared was not something as abstract as 'the dark'..."

As Eugene spoke, his eyes kept drifting toward the bed. I looked that way. A noticeably bulging small pack. ...Hmm?

I stepped off Eugene's back, walked over to the bed—

"Ah! That's—!"

Ignoring the protest completely, I upended the pack onto the floor.

Clunk-clunk-roll.

With a heavy series of sounds, what tumbled out onto the floor were: a palm-sized golden goddess figurine, a silver box set with gems, and four or five other assorted treasures.

"..."

Eugene and I exclaimed simultaneously.

Not that I cared about his reasons—mine were perfectly clear. I recognized these items. Two nights ago. The treasury I'd broken into in the castle—these things had been on the shelves.

"—W-wait... these are from the castle...!?"

Plink-a-plink, plink-a-plink, plink-a-pliiink—

Whispering in the depths of my chest
How could I resist the temptation
Of the devil in my heart
Facing the shining hidden treasures
I accidentally swiped them
An innocent youth of only thirty-five.

"Don't sing!"

Kick! My toe exploded into Eugene's face! "Guh! To kick aside my sweet and painful song of youth with a single word...!" "What 'youth' at thirty-five!? And you're not honoring me again!"
"My heart is always that of a traveling boy!"
"Setting aside your babbling! So! Two days ago, when we went to the castle together, you were blinded by greed and stole some of the treasure—and then today, you suddenly felt guilty and ran away—is that it!?"
"I object to my words being called 'babbling' so casually, but regardless, that's what happened!"
"Don't be so defiant and proud! What do you plan to do with this treasure!?"

"Because I don't know, I'm singing like this!"
"Is that just escapism!?" But... from what I'd heard from the Chairman, there was no talk of any castle treasures being stolen... Whether the people at the castle were hiding the theft to save face, or their management was so lax they hadn't noticed...
"...Anyway... you have to return this."

"Eeeeeeeeeh..."
"Don't 'eh' me! For some reason it hasn't become public yet, but if you're found out and caught after a full-scale investigation starts, there will be no excuses or leniency!"

"...W-well, that's true... but even so, how am I supposed to return it... In my plan, it would be most persuasive to explain that 'Lady Lina threatened me, saying she'd beat me up if I didn't steal it'..."

"Don't blame others!" "Then what should I do!?" Turn yourself in. Immediately. —I wanted to say that, but if I did, stories about me and the Sorcerers' Guild would naturally come out too. Is there some good trick...? I thought for a moment— Then, I clapped my hands and said, "Let's blame someone else."

"So that's what it comes down to," Eugene's voice said, mixed with accusation, but I naturally ignored him completely.

The treetops rustled in the night wind, and the forest itself surged and swayed like a giant living creature. The forest, which should have been nearly pitch black, however, had light. The light of a campfire surrounded by bandits— Men sitting around the fire, engrossed in conversation.

"—So? What was that all about?" "I don't know! I was tied up and taken into the city... after being put to sleep with magic—when I woke up, I was dressed in weird clothes and lying in a back alley. So I managed to escape back here... but I have no idea what happened."

"I see... might be that 'catch and release' thing I've heard rumors about. It was a disaster, but anyway, I'm glad you're safe. Well, it's best to just think of it as being bitten by a stray dog and forget it..."

"Fireball!"

KABOOM!

"Gyahhh!?" "Again!?" The bandits were blown away, grumbling about something, by my spell attack.

As I walked over, Bandit Number One, who had fallen, just moved his eyes and looked up at me. "Ah! The stray dog again!?"

"Who are you calling a stray dog!? ...Wait, are you the same guy I caught the day before yesterday?"
"Don't tell me you've already forgotten my face!?"
"Well, I didn't even intend to remember it in the first place..."
"What!? ...Damn it... making a fool of me...!"
"Now, now. Don't worry about it. This time I'll properly hand you over to the city guards."

"That's not comforting! ...You... what's your name?"
"...Why do you want to know something like that?"
"...Right now... it seems like I've lost... but I'll definitely get my revenge someday! That's why I asked for your name! If you don't want to say it, fine, but I've got your face memorized!"

"—My name is Lina. Lina Inverse."
"—I'm sorry. I think I was wrong. I'll throw away the idea of revenge, work properly from now on, and try to become a respectable person. So, I'd be happy if you didn't do anything too terrible to me." The moment I introduced myself. For some reason, Bandit Number One started apologizing in a flat, child-like tone. ...Hmm... it seems my name value worked... but why? Why do I feel annoyed? ...Well... whatever...

"—Eugene, sorry, could you take this guy again?"
"Hmph. I understand." In response to my call, Eugene, who had been waiting in the bushes, appeared. —And so. Lina and Eugene left the scene, bringing along Bandit Number One, who had suddenly become obedient—

"—A thief!"
"Again!?"
"Give me a break, damn it!"
Anger, curses, and grumbles echoed through the night castle. ...Well... I can certainly understand feeling fed up after having someone sneak in so easily several times in a

row... Keep it up. Tonight is the last time. Probably.

In exactly the same manner as the other day, I led the soldiers into the city, keeping a steady distance.
"Hiyah!"
"You won't escape, you!"
"This time for sure!" I could hear the bloodthirsty voices of the soldiers behind me, even more intense than before. This time too, as usual, the sorcerer group didn't seem to be following due to their lack of stamina... —And then! Right in my path—in the middle of the street, a single swaying shadow!

"This time you won't escape! You thief!" I recognized the voice. Yes. I didn't know his name or face, but it was that sorcerer who had stood in my way before!
"You… from the other day..."

Smack-thump. He seemed to have a lot to say, but unfortunately, I didn't have time to deal with him. I ran past him in one go, closed the distance, and delivered a flying knee kick to his face!

Feeling the sorcerer collapse behind me, I hurried on. I entered a narrow alley, turned a corner, and reached the meeting point with Eugene! This time for sure— Eugene was there. Dressed in the exact same black clothes as me, bringing along Bandit Number One, who had become strangely obedient.

Alright! Just as planned! "The rest is up to you!" As I passed him, Eugene gave me a silent "okay" sign— "I caught him! I caught the thief!" Eugene shouted.
"What!?"
"This way!?"

Without delay, soldiers appeared in groups at the end of the street. What they saw was Eugene, appearing to have caught the person in black. "I-it's him! No mistake!" One of the lead soldiers shouted excitedly and started walking toward Eugene and the others with the other soldiers.

Bandit Number One in black wasn't unconscious, but he didn't seem to have any intention of resisting and didn't even try to struggle against Eugene. A soldier walked up— "You won't escape again! You!" Barking, the soldier grabbed an arm. Eugene's arm. Wait... what? "...E-excuse me... the thief..." Eugene looked bewildered and pointed toward Bandit Number One with his eyes, but the soldier said in a voice full of anger,

"Did you think such an excuse would work!? I saw you clearly that time near the treasury! You did a fine job of blowing us away with that strange spell that time, didn't you!?" Aaaagh! Come to think of it! Hidden in the shadows, I almost cried out. That day when we sneaked into the castle treasury.

I jumped out from behind Eugene and unleashed a spell on the approaching soldiers. But—in that dark hallway where the only lights were wall lamps, Eugene, with his white clothes, silver hair, and inappropriately rugged face, was the only one who stood out, so they probably didn't even see me. And the soldier who was at the front that time—is this guy...?

"W-what are you saying, Mr. Soldier!? I am just a simple minstrel. Such a bold act is..."
"There's no way a simple minstrel could catch a thief who made fools of us!"
"...No, well, that's..."
"—H-help me!" In the silence born from Eugene's hesitation, the one who spoke up was none other than Bandit Number One. "I was suddenly caught and made to wear these clothes... he seems to be planning to frame me as the one who attacked the castle!"

Ngh! This guy! For a nameless bandit, his timing and explanation were incredibly persuasive! I mean, it *was* the truth! "Look, he even pushed these things on me!" Saying that, the bandit took several treasures from his chest—the ones Eugene had swiped!

"Th-this is!?" "From the treasury...!" The soldiers' eyes all turned toward Eugene at once. "That settles it!"
"No doubt about it."
"What a bold fellow!"
"...W-wait! It's... whoa! Help...!" Listening to Eugene's voice as he was dragged away by the soldiers from my hiding spot in the shadows. I whispered softly in my heart.
—Sorry. I just can't deal with you anymore—

And so. Peaceful days returned once again to Quarland City. It seems all the magical tools were returned from the Lord, and the relationship between the castle and the Guild is going reasonably well.

According to rumors on the wind, Bandit Number One even went straight and started a vegetable shop or something. And they lived happily ever after.
...Ah... Well... I'm sure Eugene, who was caught, told the soldiers about me and the Sorcerers' Guild, but in the end, the castle never said anything about it.

Well, I can guess the reason. If the whole thing started because the Lord didn't return things he took from the Guild, it would look bad for them.

They probably just let it go. As for Eugene, who accidentally swiped the treasure...
—If I close my eyes, I can see it. The scene of a middle-aged minstrel plucking his harp in a dim prison cell, being yelled at by a guard to "be quiet"— Well, I hope he works hard on his rehabilitation and never shows up in front of me again.And they lived happily ever after. (End of A Small but Rich Melody)

Merciless Spot-Grabbing (Part 1)

BOOM—

In the midst of a howling night wind. I met him.

That man.

"—Who are you—? A woman—?"

A low—but young—voice. His face was buried in shadow, backlit by moonlight, completely invisible.

The rustling trees answered first. Leaves scattered in the wind, and the man's cloak billowed as he slowly moved position—searching for a favorable angle. But naturally, I wasn't going to let him have it.

"—Which means—" I said, moving openly into a position to keep him in check. "Looks like you're here for the same reason I am."

The man stopped moving.

"...Don't you think there are times in life when compromise is necessary?"

"If that's what you think—then you compromise."

"...When two opinions clash... the outcome is always the same."

"Namely—one side loses, and one side wins."

"...Hmm..."

At my words, the man gave a small laugh. His face was still hidden in shadow, but I could read the atmosphere.

"—My name is Leonard. Leonard Fantazma. One of the Uranbal Sage Alliance—"

The Sage Alliance—I'd heard the name. Apparently they were an organization formed by mages who had broken from the Sorcerers' Guild and gone their own way. But the word "sage" itself didn't have any fixed definition. It was more of a honorific—applied to someone who had achieved something noteworthy in culture or research. You could call it a kind of title. Which meant that a rogue mage who left the Guild calling themselves a "sage" couldn't really be recognized as one—but couldn't exactly be denied it either.

Regardless, now I had a rough picture of who I was dealing with.

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. Commissioned by the Uranbal Sorcerers' Guild—"

I gave my own name in return.

"...Oh, is that so..."

The faint sound of interest—and hostility—hidden under his words. The man murmured a small spell.

"—Light—"

The soft mage-light it produced was enough to illuminate us both.

He looked to be in his early twenties. Silver hair falling to his shoulders. Eyes the cold deep blue of a fathomless lake. He was handsome enough to be called beautiful—but the coldness in his eyes and the color of his hair gave him an impression of ice. Beneath his cloak, he wore a robe embroidered with magical script, resembling priestly vestments.

"I know that name. Not only from rumors—I heard it from a colleague. —Do you remember the name Meril?"

"Meril!?"

My voice jumped at the name Leonard threw out into the wind. I knew that name. A girl I'd met on my travels once. She'd said she worked as a sage in Uranbal.

"You remember her, it seems."

"Of course I do. She's that one, right? The sort of slow creature."

"Wow, don't casually say such terrible things about people. Though, yes, that's fair."

He criticized and agreed in the same breath. Terrible, he said—but she was someone who had tried to trick me. I didn't owe her any consideration.

"Then, Lina Inverse! Do you remember?! What you said about us sages—that we're 'useless' and 'arrogant'?!"

"...Huh...? Did I say that...?"

"Meril said she definitely heard it."

"That must be a misunderstanding. Probably... I mean, okay, maybe I expressed the opinion that they couldn't be called particularly practical as a group, and that they tend to wear their pride a little too openly on their sleeves, in a casual sort of way, but..."

"THAT'S WHAT 'USELESS AND ARROGANT' MEANS!"

Dammit, he figured it out!

"So... you're worked up over a second-hand complaint?"

"That's about eighty percent of it, yes—but that's not all! Even if we were to settle this here and now, we can hardly resort to a full-scale magical battle in this location. So instead! I propose we let intellect decide the outcome—and at the same time demonstrate just how superior our minds are!"

"...Uhh..."

I took a slight step back at the passionate sage's declaration.

"When you say 'superior minds'... you're doing a flower-viewing spot-grab and challenging someone to a quiz battle... that's not really the look of someone with great intellect, honestly..."

"DON'T SAY THAT!"

Leonard's shriek rang out through the night wind.

There is a tree called the Animuzia. It only grows in a few small areas around Uranbal—but once a year, for just a few days, it bursts into full bloom all at once. Region-specific and time-limited. That's why it earned its nickname: the phantom flower.

When the season came, not only local residents but people from far away would travel just to see them. Naturally, by the time the flowers bloomed, crowds would have gathered around every Animuzia tree—and anyone who showed up on the day itself would find no good viewing spot remaining.

So the locals would send someone ahead to claim a spot before the flowers opened.

This time around, when I happened to pass through Uranbal, the Sorcerers' Guild hired me—of all people—to do exactly that. Frankly speaking, it was an incredibly boring job: just standing around watching a spot. I'd almost turned it down—but the fee was decent, and I was genuinely curious to see these "phantom flowers," so I took it.

But—when I actually arrived at the site, I discovered something I hadn't known: the Sorcerers' Guild wasn't the only one trying to claim a viewing spot.

In the wind. Lina and Leonard face each other. Over this very spot. There were other open places nearby, certainly. But this position looked out between the treetops toward the lord's castle in Uranbal—which meant when the flowers bloomed, you'd see them blazing in full color with the magnificent castle rising behind them. In other words, the perfect flower-viewing location. There was no way I was giving it up.

But obviously, starting a full magic battle here and blowing up all the surrounding trees would be the worst possible outcome. So Leonard's suggestion of settling it some other way did make sense—but—

"QUESTION ONE!"

"HOLD IT!"

Leonard suddenly shouted, ignoring my words and opinions entirely.

"Of all the rivers flowing through the Laizer Empire, which is the FOURTH longest?!"

"...Um... excuse me...?"

"BWAHAHAHAHAHA! You don't know! 'The longest river'—sure, some people remember that! Someone from that country might even remember the third! But FOURTH is a

different story! Almost no one knows it! But I know it! THAT'S what makes a sage a sage! Of course I know it! Heh! How intellectual! Oh, I'm good! Truly worthy of the title 'sage'! Sage! That's sort of smart-sounding! Sage! Kind of really intellectual! Sage—earns the trust of the common masses and is totally popular with the ladies too! Praise me! Lavish me with meaningless compliments!"

"...Excuse me... Hello? Mister Sage...?"

In the face of this inexplicable self-praise, I flapped a hand dismissively.

"...You're actually really dumb, aren't you..."

"MGGKH! You can't say that!"

...He knows it himself...?

"Anyway, knowing the fourth-longest river... what possible use does that have...?"

"You don't understand even that?" The sage tossed his cloak dramatically in the wind.

"Isn't it obvious? It comes in handy for showing off in all sorts of situations!"

"...Oh."

Thank you for that illuminating and convincing answer. Truly, profoundly, deeply stupid.

"So! Answer my question! Heh... though a creature of your level could hardly be expected to know the ans—"

"The Salmit River."

"....."

Leonard froze solid at my casual answer.

"The. Sal. Mit. River."

His body swayed slightly at my repetition.

"...H... How do you know that...?!"

"—Heh..."

I tossed my hair in the night wind.

"In short—something like this isn't a big deal at all. Not quite to the degree you think it is."

"...Ggh...!"

Leonard groaned at my words. I stood there with a smile. Bluffing is essential in this world. Therefore, in situations like this, you absolutely do not say, "Actually, I remembered it for the exact same reason as you." That stays buried forever.

"It seems you're somewhat capable..."

"Then—it's my turn!"

"Yeah, go on, girl!" came a cheerful voice from beside us.

I turned at the voice and—

An old man?

Somehow, at some point, a man with a sake bottle in hand had sat down near us, just outside the ring of magical light.

"...Wh... who are you?"

"Heh heh! Just a passerby!" the old man answered cheerfully. "But I heard a noise and came to have a look, and lo and behold—a great contest of the minds! Far more interesting than drinking alone! So, young lady—ask your question!"

"...Uh... right..."

The unexpected spectator aside... I did have a question ready. I'd decided it during the quiz standoff.

I cleared my throat.

"The Ragdoll family line—spanning generation to generation for over three hundred years as the greatest lineage of magic craftsmen in the Eastern Kingdoms—name every head of the family from the first through the ninth."

"....."

"I'll be impressed if you know all nine."

Leonard went pale.

"...Are you serious...?"

"Dead serious."

"...Actually... I'm a bit embarrassed to admit this, but I... only know seven..."

"Not all nine means a loss."

"Wait, can't we renegotiate the conditions—"

"Nope."

"You're ruthless!" Leonard shouted, then went silent for a moment. Eventually, reluctantly: "...Fine. I'll concede this round..."

"Great. Then you give up the spot."

"That's EXACTLY what I won't concede!"

"Then what was the point of any of this?!"

We glared at each other.

"...Why does the quiz have to decide the whole spot anyway?" Leonard muttered after a moment.

"You're the one who started it!"

"True. But consider—even if you win the quiz battle, is the spot actually secure? The opening of the flowers is still days away. Are you planning to stand watch the whole time?"

"...Well... that's..."

Honestly, yes, that was going to be a problem.

"My point exactly." Leonard crossed his arms. "The truly decisive method would be to maintain possession of the spot until the flowers bloom. Right?"

"...That's... fair..."

"The Sage Alliance has already sent two people here—myself and my assistant Maria. As long as one of us is present, we hold the position. Whereas you appear to be alone."

"Ha! I'll just stay awake the whole time!"

"Heh. How long can you stay awake?"

"...As long as I want."

"Is that so. Well, then." He smiled thinly. "Maria—would you be so kind?"

"Of course."

A quiet voice answered from the shadows—and a girl stepped into the light. She looked to be around twelve or thirteen. Black hair, pretty face, calm feline eyes. She was carrying a small tray.

"I made some soup. Please help yourself."

"Huh?" Somehow, soup had appeared. I looked at Leonard, who gave an exaggerated shrug. "My assistant Maria—a remarkable young lady in many ways, including her cooking. Please accept it. We can even share. There's no need for hostility here."

My guard was up, obviously—but the smell was genuinely appealing. All-nighter, no food since forever, and a hot bowl of soup right in front of me... I'd had worse plans than eating something and then keeping watch.

I sat down, accepted the bowl Maria held out, and took a sip.

...Surprisingly good.

"There's a hidden flavor in here, isn't there?"

"You can tell? That I'm using a secret ingredient?"

Maria's eyes went wide with surprise. Then she smiled again.

"I'm using Blueleaf berries."

"Hmm... ..."

"...Wait just a minute!"

I couldn't help but exclaim at the casually dropped detail.

"Blueleaf berries?! Those are—!"

"—Yes. A berry often used in magical experiments, with strong sleep-inducing properties."

It wasn't Maria who said that—it was Leonard, who smoothly stood up from his seated position and stepped over to Maria's side, placing a hand on her shoulder with a triumphant smirk.

"I should reintroduce myself. She’s not a member of the Sorcerers' Guild. She is my assistant, Maria Florence."

Maria turned her feline eyes toward me and smiled quietly.

"...Damn...!"

By the time I could react, it was already too late. A deep drowsiness welled up from the core of my body and grew rapidly stronger. Staying up all night on a full stomach—this was going to be bad.

"Exploiting the psychological openings of our opponent with a chemical flanking attack! Heh heh! The very essence of strategic genius! So, sleep well, Lina Inverse! We'll politely leave you somewhere in a corner of town! And of course—we'll be using this spot for ourselves! Ahahahaha!"

—Damn...! Damn it all! To fall for a trick this basic...!

Frustration and regret crashed over me—but I couldn't hold out. My knees hit the ground. The sleepiness had already eaten through half my thoughts. Their laughter. Fading. In and out.

...Damn this spot... I'm not giving it up... Absolutely not...

...A spell... this... technique...

...If I just.....

.....

Someone was shaking me.

...Leave me alone... I want to sleep a little longer...

...They kept shaking me... leave me alone...

Muttering vague complaints, I tried to push them away with my hand. I swung and hit nothing.

I'd either slept too much or not enough—either way, my head was throbbing.

They shook me again.

"...Mmrrmff..."

With a thoroughly unintelligible noise, I opened my eyes reluctantly.

The sky was bright.

My body was swaying.

My field of vision: treetops, and white flowers.

...White... flowers—?

"—Oh!"

My mind snapped awake. I remembered. What had happened.

Leonard's assistant had slipped a sleeping drug into my food, and I'd passed out.

I pushed myself halfway upright by reflex—and my body was still swaying.

...Hm...?

I looked around. Everywhere: Animuzia trees in full white bloom.

The flowers were blooming—which meant I must have been out for nearly a full day? Apparently so? They really were beautiful flowers. All blooming together at once—truly spectacular. I could understand why people made such a fuss over the viewing spot.

But right now—

Flowers blooming, no one else in sight.

I couldn't see anyone else around.

...Hm...

I tilted my head. The ground shook again. It seemed the swaying I'd felt wasn't someone shaking me—it was this vibration. It didn't feel quite like an earthquake, though...

I couldn't stand up, so I stayed on all fours and looked around—

"...What... is this?"

I heard myself mutter.

The scenery around me had... changed.

Trees still grew around me, flowers still bloomed. But everything else was gone.

From where we'd been standing, you should have been able to see the castle through the treetops. It was nowhere to be seen. Not just the castle—the town I should have been able to see, the mountains in the distance—all of it, gone.

.....?

First priority: assess the situation. I murmured a spell.

"Levitation!"

I used the floating spell and rose into the blue sky. From above, I looked down at my surroundings—and finally understood what was happening.

"...H... huh?!"

I couldn't help but cry out.

Where I had been standing—it was on the back of a massive, golem-like creature, shaped vaguely like a table, lumbering slowly around the outskirts of Uranbal with an entire grove of Animuzia trees still growing on its back.

...So... that means this is...

In the instant before I'd lost consciousness to the sleeping drug, desperately not wanting to give up the spot—apparently I had cast some kind of spell. And from the looks of things, it had been a golem-creation spell. By turning the entire section of ground—complete with its trees—into a golem and setting it walking, no matter how deeply I slept, Leonard and Maria couldn't do anything about it.

...That must have been the idea, anyway, conceived in my barely-functioning drugged brain when I was about to lose consciousness.

...So... what do I do with this...

As I was pondering the question—

"THERE you are! Lina Inverse finally shows herself!"

I looked toward the voice. Leonard, floating with his own levitation spell.

"You! Look what you've done! Because of you, the flower viewing this year is completely ruined!"

Seriously? Even at a time like this, he's worried about the flower viewing? Anyway, if I were to honestly say "I'm sorry" here, I'd lose. He'd definitely take advantage of it and pin the whole responsibility on me!

"What are you talking about?! This whole thing started because you guys used a petty trick like drugging me!" "You're the one who cast the spell!" "Ohooo! So what you're saying is, you couldn't even predict how I'd react in a situation like that? So the 'oh-so-wise' Sage's calculation error carries *no* responsibility?!" "...Gh... Gunuuuuu...!" Leonard gnashed his teeth at my words. Of course, I was doing nothing but shifting the goalposts, but Leonard—with his baseless obsession with being "wise"—didn't even notice.

"And furthermore!" I pointed a finger straight at him, doubling down on the distraction. "With this, your Sage Alliance's ambition to 'have a flower viewing in a great spot' is dead! And it's all because of your 'oh-so-wise' repeated calculation blunders! Heh heh! I can't wait to see what your colleagues think of your performance!" "...Mgh... mgh gh gh...!" Leonard furrowed his brow and jaw, growling for a moment, then— "...Heh... heh heh heh..." Suddenly, he broke into a smirk and let out a soft chuckle. "—No. Not yet. The outcome hasn't been decided yet! From here, my counterattack—my great reversal—begins! This is truly Leonard Magic! The very reason I am a Sage! Watch closely, Lina Inverse! I shall show you my god-like tactical brilliance!"

Having said his piece, he spun around and floated away. ...Man... his back looks so incredibly uncool... Anyway, I'll ignore that for now. The problem was the golem I'd

created, which was still stomping along. I had interfered with the earth spirits to make it take this form and action— I landed back on the golem's back for the time being. "Stop, Golem!" I tried giving the command... but the golem showed no sign of stopping. ...I see... Golems basically prioritize the command they were given at the moment of creation. This guy was probably told something like "Keep walking no matter what." By me. Not that I remember. That's why no matter what happened—even if I tried to change the order—it wouldn't stop.

To be honest, stopping its functions would be easy. I could just sever the interference with the earth spirits or blast it with an offensive spell. But the problem was the Animjia trees growing on its back. If I shut down the golem, its entire body—which was shaped by magic—would collapse, and the trees rooted there would naturally be torn to shreds. If I ended up killing all the trees, that would be seriously bad. ...Now then... what should I do...

While I was pondering: ...*Whaaaaaaaaat?!* The distant clamor of people reached my ears, carried by the wind. ...What now? I moved to the edge of the table-like golem and looked out— Amidst a world swaying from the golem's steps. Another golem, this one carrying the *castle* on its back, slowly stood up! ...Are you kidding me?! It also started walking on four legs, heading right this way. Then, I heard Leonard's voice! "Hahahahahaha! Can you hear me, Lina Inverse?!" He was using a spell to amplify his voice and calling out to me. "A prime position to view the castle amidst the Animjia flowers... Your plan to monopolize that position by securing the Animjia grove—I shall praise it as brilliant for now!

However! Then we shall simply secure the castle! Now the conditions are fifty-fifty! What will you do now, Lina Inverse?!"

...No... even if you ask me what I'll do... I feel like something is fundamentally wrong here... Plus, there's zero originality in your methods. After talking big about a "secret plan for a great reversal," this is the result? Good grief. I chanted a spell to amplify my own voice—

"I'm not doing this because I want to! Leonard of the Sage Alliance... was it? This is all your fault for drugging me in the first place!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. Of course. On the surface, it sounded like I was talking to Leonard, but in reality, I was explaining the situation to the townspeople. It's what you might call "shifting the blame under the guise of conversation."

"And just so you know... You're so obsessed with this flower viewing that you're calling it 'even,' but from your perspective, you're just seeing flowers in the distance from the castle—I don't think that even counts as a 'flower viewing' anymore!"

A brief silence fell after my point. "......I screwed up!!" Finally, Leonard's voice of regret echoed throughout the town of Uranbaar.

"...Um... You really are an idiot, aren't you...?" "...Wh-Wh-Quiet! This is... how should I put it... —That’s right! Yes, this is a means to hijack *your* golem! Yes! Precisely! I shall engage your golem in melee combat and render it immobile! That is what this golem is for! It certainly wasn't something I came up with on a whim! Kuh! My tactical brilliance is truly terrifying! And so! Taste the 'powah' of my golem!"

With that shout. The golem carrying the castle on its back began to advance toward us!

Leonard has unleashed a golem with a castle on its back! How will Lina handle this?! Can she protect the castle and the Animjia trees?! And what will become of the Sorcerers' Association's flower viewing?! I feel like the best option here would be to "leave it and run," but that's a promise we won't keep! Anyway, next time: "Spot-Claiming Without Honor" Part 2! Go take a bath and wait!

(Merciless Spot-Grabbing: To Be Continued)

Merciless Spot-Grabbing (Part 2)

Commissioned by the Sorcerers' Association, Lina Inverse is trying to claim a spot for the Animjia flower viewing. Opposing her is Leonard Phantasma, of the Uranbar Sage Alliance! A fierce battle where neither side can be underestimated. However, Lina was drugged by Leonard's assistant, Maria, and loses consciousness. When she wakes up again. She is on top of a golem she created with a spell just before falling asleep—a golem carrying the Animjia trees in full bloom on its back. And now, another golem created by Leonard is attacking!

...Rustle... As a passing breeze swayed the green leaves. I met him again. That man.

"I've finally found you! How dare you leave me like that and run away back then?!" At his words, I gave a small shrug. "Oh, you have the wrong person. Me? I have no idea what you're talking about." "Don't try to dodge me with that weird accent! I won't let you say you've forgotten, Lina Inverse!" The man—Leonard—pointed at me with his eyes wide with anger.

And standing quietly beside him was a plain-looking girl a bit younger than me—Leonard's assistant, Maria. We were on a road going through the forest, with no other people around. It was certainly a perfect place for an ambush.

"...Hey... Wait a minute. When you put it like that, it makes it sound like I've done something to earn your grudge." "I *do* have a grudge! Or rather, did you really think I wouldn't hold one after that situation?!" "...Uh..." I mumbled and scratched my head. A while ago, Leonard and I had a fierce battle over a flower-viewing spot. One thing led to another, and both sides ended up creating giant golems—

Shaking the air and rumbling the ground, the two massive bodies clashed!

G-GO-WAN!

The earthen doll I created, carrying the Animjia flowers. And the golem Leonard created, carrying the castle. The other golem momentarily halted my golem’s movement as it tried to walk forward. That was exactly the moment I was waiting for. I slapped my hand onto the back of the flower-blooming golem. "Spirit Spell!" I chanted the Golem Creation spell! ...Gh... gugogogogo...! The table-like back surged and swayed. Like a sea roughened by a storm. And then.

SPLASH!

Using the back of the table golem as material, a new golem was born. "W-Wh-What?!" Leonard's voice, still amplified by magic, echoed in shock. Basically, a golem created by a spell is made by interfering with and controlling the earth spirits. However, since a single human's magical power has limits, when creating and operating a giant golem, that power only interferes with vital parts like the joints. In other words. There should have been almost no magical interference on the "back" portion of the giant table golem.

Taking advantage of that, I cast a spell again and—using the part with the blooming Animjia flowers as material—created a golem about two sizes smaller. The new golem with the flowers climbed down the parent golem's body to the ground. Thus. The blooming Animjia trees were safely protected. This was the ultimate move! Mission complete while leaving the enemy behind!

"Wait a second! You're not seriously planning to just leave me here, are you?! Hey, you!" Ignoring Leonard, who was shouting something behind me— The commotion was safely resolved. That was two days ago.

"I genuinely cannot think of any point at which you had grounds to hold a grudge against me..."

"MMGGGHHHH! To say that so blithely and without a trace of self-awareness! Because of the chaos you caused, the Sage Alliance received a formal reprimand from the local lord—and I was forced to leave the city entirely! I, of all people! The very individual who, in private moments, jots notes in the margins of parchment along the lines of 'it would be nice if I could hold all the knowledge in the world inside my head someday' was driven out like a common vagrant!"

"...Look... even granting that... if you turn the ground under a town into a walking golem..."

"How am I to restore my wounded pride and reclaim my glory?!"

He wasn't listening. Right. That type.

Which meant the obvious next line was—

"The answer is obvious! Settle the unfinished business from that day!"

There it was.

He pointed squarely at me—already very much not interested in any of this—and declared:

"Lina Inverse! Flower-viewing spot-grabbing rematch!"

"ARE YOU AN IDIOT?!"

WHOMP!

"GBLPK?!"

My roundhouse kick sent Leonard tumbling across the ground a solid two and a half rotations.

"I can sort of understand the 'rematch' part—but why is it a flower-viewing spot-grab specifically?!"

"Fool! Is that not self-evident?!"

Leonard wobbled back upright.

"The dispute originated from a flower-viewing spot-grab! Therefore, it must be settled by the same means! That is the proper order of things!"

"...If we're talking about 'proper order of things,' then 'the person who caused a mess with the lord gets their due punishment' is also perfectly valid."

"Hah. You still fail to understand. Sometimes 'proper order' must be bent. The world requires it. They call this 'necessary evil.'"

"There is no rule of logic that covers your personal dodge of responsibility! That's just blame-shifting and a grudge! Besides—even if we do a spot-grab, the Animuzia flowers are already finished blooming."

"Who said we were doing the Animuzia?! Look!"

He flung his cloak wide and swept his arm around.

"Every tree in this area is a Tsunetsubaki!"

"...A Tsunetsubaki...?"

"A common broadleaf tree found everywhere, which blooms this time of year with a somewhat dull, olive-greenish flower! Around here, the opening should be tomorrow or the day after at the latest! Until then—whoever holds a specific spot wins!"

"Why on EARTH would I be sad enough to fight over a viewing spot for some dingy common flower?!"

"Consider it a favor to me!"

"I'm not doing you any favors!"

"Do me this favor and I'll give you fifty gold coins!"

"....."

"...Pardon?"

I blinked at Leonard's casual statement.

"...Fifty gold coins...?"

"That's right! But only if you manage to beat me! That should be sufficient motivation to accept the challenge, don't you think? ...Mind you—the odds of actually defeating me are essentially nonexistent, but still."

"...I suppose next you'll say you don't actually have that money and this is some kind of bluff..."

"Don't underestimate me!"

Leonard reached under his cloak and produced a leather coin pouch. The heavy jingle when he set it down was unmistakable.

OHH?! That sound was definitely gold! And judging by the volume—fifty coins would barely put a dent in there!

With that, the situation was entirely different.

I clapped my hands together decisively.

"Right, I accept the challenge! This location works fine since it's right here. Added rule: losing consciousness counts as forfeit and defeat. Any objections? No? Good. That's settled. Starting now. Fireball."

"...Wait, what, hold on—"

KRAK-BOOM!

I launched into it without a breath's pause, and my blast hit a completely unprepared Leonard head-on without an ounce of mercy or hesitation.

He toppled over with a scorched thud and stopped moving.

"All right, match over. ...Now then, the winnings as promised—"

I stepped up to the fallen Leonard and reached for the leather pouch—

—!?—

SNAP!

I sensed something and leapt backward. A flash of dark light swept past just in front of me. A thin chain with a small blade at its tip. There was only one person who could have thrown that besides Leonard.

Slowly, I looked in that direction.

The chain was drawn back, disappearing under a cloak. And standing there—of course—

"Would you mind stopping there?"

Maria spoke in a quiet, composed voice. Those feline eyes on me.

"...Does he deserve that kind of loyalty from you?"

"That's for me to decide."

She drew a slender hand out from under her cloak—fitted with a thick black glove. Around her wrist, presumably the chain she'd just thrown, were multiple coils of thin black chain.

"...You're saying 'stop'—but those are my words, really. If I leave Leonard the way he is, he'll wake up and come after me again with 'the real deciding match, this time for real'—you know that's exactly what'll happen. This will never end."

I said it carefully, measuring the distance. To an untrained eye, Maria would just look like she was standing casually. But to me—someone with some sword experience—there wasn't a single opening in her stance.

"It will end," Maria said, in the tone of someone stating a perfectly obvious fact.

"When you lose."

Her voice and the chains moved simultaneously. Two at once, left and right.

As I evaded, I drew the short sword from my belt. Simultaneously I began casting. The chains I'd dodged changed trajectory in midair!

KRING! I batted one away with my sword and let the other wrap around the blade. Maria pulled back the deflected chain and drew it in—and my spell completed!

"Lightning!"

The generated charge ran up the sword—up the chain—and should have coursed through Maria's body— But she merely narrowed the corners of her eyes slightly. Into a smile.

Maria shifted her footing by a step. As her cloak billowed, I saw the end of a chain buried in the ground pull free. So. She'd read my attack, planted the chain's other end in the earth, and redirected the charge into the ground.

Which meant—her next move would be—!

Acting on the chill running down my spine, I turned my sword. At that exact moment Maria unleashed her own spell!

"Lightning."

It was nearly simultaneous—her casting and me driving my sword into the ground. SNAP! Just barely. The bolt she'd launched ran through the chain, down the sword, and into the earth.

"Not bad. I'll give you that," murmured, her small lips gave a slight smirk.

...This girl was the real thing! She was reading my capabilities and movement patterns to some degree and responding to them accordingly. Honestly, she was far more dangerous than Leonard. I had no idea why someone this skilled was working as that idiot's assistant.

So then—chain still coiled around my sword, I began casting. Maria pulled at the chain—but I had just a fraction more strength. She shot another chain toward me—and now!

"Ice Bolt!"

KRING! I hit the flying chain with the spell, and the blast of cold locked both the new chain and the first one in a massive block of ice. Even with her skill, the non-physical Maria would have a hard time with her weapons this weighted down.

With her weapons immobilized, I dropped my sword and broke into a dash toward Maria. The instant her lips moved slightly—I threw myself sideways!

"Freeze Arrow."

Her spell came at exactly that moment. Several arrows of cold appeared right where I'd been a moment ago. If I hadn't jumped sideways, I'd have charged straight into them.

I swung wide and closed in from the side. Maria changed the trajectory of her arrows to follow—but I evaded by a hair each time. In my field of vision, the girl's figure grew larger, and just as I was about to reach her—I threw myself sideways again.

A third and fourth chain cut through the air where I'd been a moment earlier.

—So I'd been right—even after her Ice Arrows were dodged, her eyes showed no unease. Meaning she'd anticipated the next move. Good.

As I landed I slammed my hand to the ground—

"Spirit Binding!"

A golem-creation spell with certain modifications. The ground around Maria surged upward and in an instant constructed a hollow golem shell—a cage of earth around her.

It wasn't spacious inside. If she tried to blast her way out with an explosion-type spell, she'd catch herself in the blast radius. The golem wasn't large enough for her to use the same kind of earth-spirit interference I'd done before. Escaping unharmed was essentially impossible.

Containment complete.

"Now, how about you surrender quietly?"

I called toward the golem that now held Maria. There were small air holes, so my voice should reach her.

"You know you can't escape. And on my end, if I want to, I can just—"

ZRRRRIIINNNGGGG!

An unpleasant grating sound cut through my words and rang out along the road.

It came from the golem standing quietly before me.

—What—?!

As I stared—

...creak...

The golem's body split. Vertically. In two.

With a writhing chain in her hand.

“...I see... so that’s how she did it...!” I understood. The method she used to escape. I’d heard there was a spell to manipulate thin threads at will.

Apparently, it was originally a spell created for civil engineering—like when building suspension bridges— What Maria used was likely that, or a variation of it. She manipulated the chain, ran it along the inside of the golem at high speed, and used it like a saw to cut the golem open from the inside.

To judge the situation and use a method like that in an instant... If it’s come to this, I have no choice but to go all out and take her down. I measured the distance while muttering a spell—

"...Uh... gh..." That was when I heard a small groan. It seemed Leonard had recovered from the damage. And then. *Twitch*. Maria’s expression changed completely. She canceled the spell on her chains, hurriedly stuffed them back under her cloak, and rushed over to him.

"Are you alright, Master Leonard?!" "...Uh... Florence... what...?" With Maria's helping hand, Leonard managed to sit up, though he was still a bit wobbly. Maria looked at him with an imploring gaze.

"You were momentarily knocked unconscious by Lina Inverse's surprise attack." "...I see... that's right... Are you alright, Florence?" "Yes. Somehow." She said in a small, vulnerable voice. There was no trace left of the sharp presence she’d shown just moments ago.

—Wait... could it be... "—Aha..." *Jolt!* At my whispered realization, the girl’s back gave a small shiver. "...Maria... Don't tell me, you and that Leonard guy..."
"This place is disadvantageous, Master Leonard!" Maria shouted with a completely changed expression.

Interrupting me, she started pulling hard on Leonard’s hand. "Let's retreat for now!" She argued with a bright red face. "But..." "Master Leonard!"
"...Mmugh..." At her insistence, Leonard gave me a sharp glare.
"To not only take us by surprise, but to frighten Florence this much!"
".....No, wait..."

"It can't be helped! Since I cannot involve Florence in danger, I shall take this as my loss for today!"He brandished his cloak with a flourish and made a grand declaration.

"But! I will surely repay this debt one day! You had better remember this!"

With those words, he turned on his heel and walked away with Maria. The girl's eyes, as she glanced back at Lina, told the whole story.

—If you say anything unnecessary, I'll kill you.

".....Errrr....."

It felt somewhat foolish to even bother chasing them, so Lina simply stood there, watching the two of them walk away into the distance.

"Now, Lina Inverse, let us have our showdown!"

"That was fast!"

It was evening that same day when Leonard stood in Lina's path again. Or rather, it was almost immediately after their last encounter. He had been waiting for her at the entrance of the town just down the road. Leonard was standing there alone in a defiant pose.

".....I don't see Maria anywhere."

When Lina said that, Leonard brushed back his hair with a smooth motion.

"I cannot involve her in a battle and let her be frightened, you see. I have her waiting at the inn."

.....I see..... Lina thought. *Which means this Leonard guy has no idea how strong Maria actually is.*

Lina had said she couldn't see her, but she could sense her presence. Maria was hiding nearby, watching how things unfolded. In that case, even if she defeated Leonard, Maria would likely show up again. Lina really wanted to avoid that kind of situation.

So, what should she do—?

"The method of our contest is simple!"

While Lina was thinking, Leonard spoke up and pointed toward the center of town.

"If you go straight down this path, you will reach a crossroads where a church stands! Turn right there, and after walking a little while, you will find an eatery named 'Blue Fish' on the right side! It has a large, blue fish sign, so you should recognize it at a glance! Whoever reaches it first and secures a seat shall be the winner!"

".....Wait, you’re still obsessed with taking a seat even at this point?"

"Hmph! I should have told you, Lina Inverse!"

He brushed back his hair again.

"A trouble that began with taking a seat must be settled by taking a seat! That is the logical conclusion! Magic is permitted. Intersections and interference against your opponent are also valid. However, if you harm an unrelated pedestrian—whether intentionally or by accident—it results in immediate defeat! Is that clear!"

".....Alright, fine....."

Lina nodded in agreement.

".....Hmph. Good resolve. Then—let's go!"

Lina and Leonard braced themselves toward the town—

"Five! Four! Three! Two! One! .....Start!"

At Leonard's signal, they both kicked off the ground at the same time. Their cloaks and hair fluttered in the wind. Both were chanting spells under their breath—and Lina was the one who finished first.

"Ray Wing!" (Deim Wind!)

She released a strong wind spell from behind her, aiming it at herself!

Voom!

Pushed by the sudden gale, Lina accelerated all at once and pulled away from Leonard! However!

"Spirit Magic!"

At that moment, Leonard cast a spell!

Rumble.

Using the cobblestones as material, a golem's head emerged from the road as if welling up. The location—was right in front of Lina's eyes!

"Whoaaaaaa!?"

Lina screamed and lost her footing—

Thump!

She tripped over the head and tumbled.

"Fuhahaha! I'm going ahead!"

"Youuuu rascaaaaaal!"

Lina raised her voice in frustration. Of course—all of this was an act.

In truth, winning this contest would have been easy. She could have just used a high-speed flight spell and made it there in a flash. Victory would have been almost certain. But if she did that, Leonard would almost certainly challenge her again, saying, "Now for the *real* showdown."

So, what was the best course of action? The answer was simple: she just had to lose. Well, losing to someone like him wasn't exactly pleasant, but it was better than being stalked by him and Maria forever.

Of course, if the loss looked too intentional, he would tell her to "take it seriously." In other words, she had to lose naturally.

"—Ugh!"

Lina pulled herself up and dashed after Leonard. It seemed she was slightly faster on her feet, as the gap slowly began to close. Eventually, the two reached the crossroads with the church. At this point, Lina had closed in right behind Leonard. Then.

"I won't let you!"

With those words, Leonard flipped his cloak with his left hand. In an instant!

Clatter clatter clatter!

Countless balls of various sizes rolled out from underneath it onto the ground! Naturally, stepping on them would cause a fall!

"Wha-wha!?"

In a panic, Lina made a large dodge to the left. This widened the distance again.

.....Hmm..... It's going according to plan..... but I'm actually starting to get a bit annoyed.....

Regardless, Lina dashed again! Before long, a blue fish sign appeared on the right side of the road!

Is that it!?

The gap between her and Leonard was closing little by little. At this pace, would they reach the shop at almost the same time? Just as she thought that!

Whoosh!

Leonard, who was ahead of her, suddenly took off his cloak!

"Whoa!"

Lina hurriedly swatted it away before she could get wrapped in it. That split second created the decisive gap.

Leonard reached the storefront. He put both hands on the door.

"Fuhahahahaha! I won!"

With a declaration of victory, he flung the shop door open with a *bang!* And then—

"—I'm sorry. We're full right now—"

A voice came from inside the shop, and Leonard came back out, looking dejected.

"......Uh....."

"Muuu..... To be full already at this hour. This means we can't get a seat."

"......Y-Yeah....."

As Lina muttered, having lost her energy, Leonard sent her a look of reproach.

"What are you going to do about this, Lina Inverse!?"

"Is this my fauuuuuult!?"

Sigh..... huff.....

Lina's shoulders heaved as she tried to calm herself down.

"......Hmph..... Regardless..... you reached the shop first..... so it's my loss....."

"I don't accept this!"

"Whaaaaaaaat!?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, Lina Inverse! A dispute over a seat must be settled by taking a seat! Since the seat couldn't be taken, no matter what you think, this is not a true conclusion!"

.....Th-This guy is.....!

Even though she had lost on purpose and even said those cheesy lines, he "doesn't accept it because a seat couldn't be taken"!? In a situation like this, people are supposed to be moved and reconcile in the confusion!

.....Fine..... if it's come to this, it can't be helped!

Sigh.....

Lina gave a small sigh.

".....What's the point in being so stubborn..... Maria will be sad, you know."

"Huh? Why does Florence-kun's name come up there? —Don't tell me! You've taken her hostage!?"

"No, that's not it! Haven't you noticed? She likes you."

"What!?"

Leonard finally showed a look of agitation.

.....Maria, who is hiding somewhere and watching, is sending a murderous gaze, but Lina continued regardless.

"The battle on the road earlier today..... When you lost consciousness, she shielded you with her own body."

It wasn't perfectly accurate, but it wasn't a wrong explanation either.

"To think such a thing happened....."

"Do you intend to worry her further!? Do you intend to make her even sadder!? A fight like this..... whether you win or lose, it's just self-satisfaction, isn't it!? The more you show this strange stubbornness and put yourself in danger, the more she grieves and puts herself at risk..... Does a self-proclaimed sage repeat such folly!?"

".....Ugh.....!"

Whether he had finally realized his mistake—or perhaps just reacted to the word "folly"—Leonard groaned softly. After showing a moment of hesitation.

.....Hmph.....

He relaxed his shoulders and exhaled deeply.

".....I see..... That may indeed be true..... A sage is a sage because he can acknowledge his own mistakes at times..... Fine. There is no point in competing further. Therefore, I shall abandon my intent to fight you."

Alright, persuasion complete!

He brushed back his hair.

"But still..... To think that Florence-kun held such feelings for me..... However..... it's a pity....."

"A pity?"

Lina repeated his words in a question, and while he remained unaware that Maria was lurking nearby, he spoke.

"Yes. If I were to be favored by someone, rather than a flat-chested child like her, I would prefer someone more..... curvy and mature....."

Before he could even finish his sentence.

CRASH!

A dive kick released by Maria from a nearby roof struck the back of Leonard's head, burying his face into the ground.

".....Men..... Why are they all like that.....?"

"Agreed. What on earth is with that 'curvy and mature' nonsense?"

As Lina said that, she downed a cup of juice with a gulp. After that incident, Lina and Maria had suddenly hit it off at a nearby eatery.

"In the first place, I'm just entering my growth spurt! In a few more years, even my chest will be much bigger!"

With that, Maria downed her orange juice in one go.

"I've still got a long way to go, too! —Hey, ma'am! Another round of the same drinks for this table!"

"—But—"

Maria set down her cup and said regretfully, "I'm disappointed in Leonard-sama. To call himself a sage while only possessing such common aesthetic values....."

.....Well..... on the other hand, if there were a sage who specifically insisted on 'it has to be a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl with no chest,' that would be a pretty big problem in its own way.....

Lina only muttered that in her mind.

".....Hey..... Maria."

Lina asked with an empty cup in her hand.

"What did you like about him?"

"Oh, that—"

She nibbled on the food on the table.

"He has good looks, he's the only child of a wealthy noble, and most importantly, he was stupid and easy to control—"

".....So even at your age, you’re a calculating gold-digger chasing a wealthy marriage!?"

BAM!

The empty cup Lina threw hit Maria squarely in the face.

A happy ending, yet not quite.

(End of Merciless Spot-Grabbing)

The Mountain of Giant Creatures

The forest was filled only with an eerie silence. Not a breath of wind blew, not even a bug chirped. Everything remained silent. It was as if everything were frightened of something.

".....It’s here..... nearby....."

"P-Please don't scare me, Lina-san....."

At Lina’s whispered words, Forness let out a trembling, thin voice. She seemed truly terrified; upon closer look, she was tightly clutching the edge of Lina’s cloak with one hand.

".....Wait, what are you doing getting so flustered? You've been associated with the one that escaped for quite a while, haven't you?"

".....That's..... true, but..... I've never had an association that didn't involve a cage in between us....."

"I see—well. Anyway—"

Rustle.

The leaves of the trees shook. Even though there was no wind.

"At the very least—it's close by. Something is."

Lina said, glaring into the depths of the thicket.

The origin of this was yesterday.

"—You’re a magic-user..... aren't you? You too."

During lunch at an eatery, a person about fourteen or fifteen years old,black-haired , dressed in magic-user attire, suddenly sat down across the table and spoke with a serious expression. The clothing lacked decoration and looked like that of an apprentice or a strictly practical type.

"Sorry for the suddenness. I’m Forness, and I belong to the Magic Association of this town."

Her expression seemed serious, but her way of speaking was somewhat lacking in sharpness.

"I’m Lina. Lina Inverse."

Lina introduced herself while her hands didn't stop cutting the lemongrass-grilled chicken.

"Actually..... I was told by the Association to make a request to traveling magic-users....."

She was silent for a moment, and then, as if making a bold decision:

"Please! Help me catch the experimental animal that escaped from the Association!"

Pfft!

Lina wasn't the only one who accidentally spat out food at her loud voice.

.....Murmur murmur murmur.....

A stir of agitation was born among the other customers filling the shop. *Th-This girl..... saying such dangerous things in a loud voice? Suddenly? Th-This is bad..... we're being noticed..... I have to gloss this over somehow!*

Lina scratched her head and said in a deliberately casual, loud voice:

"Ha..... ha-ha. Telling such a startling joke again....."

"It's not a joke! It will be a disaster if it's left alone! Please listen seriously!"

However, far from noticing the surrounding situation, she raised her voice even more.

".....No..... well....."

"Please! The matter is urgent!"

"Uh..... so....."

"If it’s left alone, there’s even a possibility that this whole area will become a wasteland!"

"....."

"Anyway, before it’s discovered by the townspeople and a panic starts....."

Thud.

For the time being, the corner of the chair Lina brought down successfully silenced her.

"...Hmm... so that means, six coins per head... eighteen for all three... even with the initial payment, it’s only twenty gold coins total... Or worse, if we can't catch any, we're stuck with just the two gold coins for preparations..."

It was dinner time that day. At the inn's dining hall, Lina and Furness were working out their strategy for the next day over their meal.

"Lina-san, that’s not a strategy, it’s just counting your chickens before they hatch..."

"Urk! ...Now that you mention it, I suppose it is... But a financial plan is essential! For instance, take the team today that caught those two. Even if we made those magically reinforced nets ourselves, the raw materials alone would cost about two gold coins... I wonder if they’re even turning a profit..."

While they were talking—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! What kind of useless meeting are you holding in a place like this, Lina Inverse!?"

Along with the familiar laugh, the duo of Naga and Ireneia stepped through the door.

"Chief!?"

"—I’ve been looking for you."

Ireneia spoke in a cold tone as she marched over and sat in an empty seat at the table without asking. Naga sat down as well and immediately started stuffing her face with the food Lina had ordered.

"You guys—"

Before Lina could even protest to Naga, Ireneia looked her straight in the eye and asked in a tone that brooked no argument:

"This afternoon—what on earth happened after you were blown away by Rabbit No. 72?"

Faced with that aura that allowed for neither quips nor complaints, Lina and Furness looked at each other and began to explain the sequence of events. The explosion. The pursuit. The encounter with the insect. The rabbit's intrusion. And the capture by that team.

".....I see....."

After they finished their story, Ireneia remained silent for a while with a grim expression, then looked up.

"In that case... I have to tell you what happened on our end. After that incident, we regained our senses before you did and began tracking the target. Before long, we found No. 72. However—just as Naga-san was about to launch a magic attack, *we* were hit by a magic attack."

"From the rabbit!?"

At Lina’s question, Ireneia shook her head.

"Of course not. It came suddenly from within the forest. I couldn't confirm the opponent's appearance... but the target was undoubtedly us, not No. 72. No. 72 escaped in the explosion. —And, I went back and checked, but apparently, there hasn't been a single report of any of the animals being captured or disposed of yet."

"—Does that mean—!?"

"—Yes—" Ireneia nodded. "This incident—something is moving behind the scenes. That's what it means."

The bright light of the full moon illuminated the night sky. In a large city, there would be streetlights powered by oil or magic, but in a town this small—especially on the outskirts—there was no such thing. Perhaps due to poor public order, or some other reason, not even a tavern was open at this hour.

Her black cloak fluttered in the darkness. She walked alone down the moonlit path where no one else passed. It was certainly not a nightly stroll; she was clearly heading somewhere with a purpose.

...*Trit-trot*...

Walking with muffled footsteps, she suddenly came to a halt. She glanced around nervously, tilted her head slightly, and then resumed her steady pace.

—Apparently, she hadn't noticed she was being followed.

Lina was using a Levitation spell to float at about the height of a second story, continuing her tail. Moving in the shadows of buildings in this state made it very unlikely she'd be spotted. Eventually, after looking around again toward a completely wrong direction, the woman vanished inside a house. It was a tiny house, teetering on the edge of being a ruin, where it was unclear if anyone actually lived. Through the gaps in the boarded-up windows, the light of a lamp shone from within.

Lina controlled her spell and descended beside the house.

Killing her presence, she approached and peeked through the gap in the boards. There were seven people inside in total. Six men, and the one woman she had been following. The men were the same crew that had caught the giant rabbit and insect earlier that day. Their faces were a bit of a blur, but their clothes were the same as this afternoon. There was no mistaking them.

Soon, the group began whispering to one another in hushed voices. Lina couldn't hear the details from where she was, but this made everything clear enough. The group continued their hushed conversation for a while, but eventually, it seemed to conclude as they stood up one by one.

—*Crap*.

Lina hurriedly chanted the Levitation spell again and floated up into the night sky. The lamplight leaking from the house suddenly went out—

...*Clunk*.

The door opened, and the group filed out just after Lina had taken to the air. The woman and the men gave each other small nods and began walking in opposite directions—the woman toward the center of town, and the men toward the far outskirts.

Tailing the woman would likely only lead back to her home. More importantly... Lina made up her mind and began following the men. They headed further and further toward the edge of town, eventually leaving it behind. They weren't heading for the highway, but a mountain path.

I see... so they're using a mountain cave as their hideout...

Lina followed them, killing her presence while blending into the shadows of the trees. She followed them for quite some time—

—!?—

Suddenly, a murderous intent erupted behind her! The moment she realized it was directed at her, Lina reflexively canceled her Levitation spell. Cutting through the air, she fell, grabbing a tree branch with both hands mid-way to break her fall before landing on the ground. Simultaneously—

K-Boom!

Above her head, the sparks of an attack spell flashed.

—*Just as I thought*.

That moment she felt the bloodlust, someone behind her had released a Fire Arrow or some similar spell toward her while she was in mid-air. The six men she had been

following stopped up ahead and turned their gazes toward her. If so, there was only one opponent—

"You noticed my tailing well."

Lina turned around and spoke. At the end of her gaze stood a single figure in the darkness.

"Umm, what do you think you're doing, Lina-san?"

The person who spoke in a carefree tone was none other than the woman she had been following halfway—the one who brought Lina the request to capture the animals, Furness herself.

"That's my line... is what I'd like to say... but well, I can pretty much guess. A magic-user stealing the research of another magic-user—honestly, it's not that rare. And there's always an assistant or staff member who gets lured by their smooth talk and betrays them for money—that’s not rare at all either."

"Heeeee. But how did you figure out that was me?"

"Anyone would notice, normally."

While sensing the men behind her slowly closing the distance and spreading out, Lina deliberately kept her eyes on Furness and continued.

"Those guys behind you definitely caught the rabbit and the insect right in front of us—yet, no report of capture went to the Association. In other words, it's natural to assume the ones who caught them belong to a different organization with a different purpose. If so, the answer 'stealing research' is an easy guess. —And then, you flat-out told me those guys were another capture team right in front of my face, didn't you? Why would you have to tell such a lie? There’s only one answer. Because you and those guys are in cahoots."

"...I see. That was indeed a failure. But in that case, Lina-san, I either need you to help us or stay silent..."

"Ho-ho. How interesting. If you think you can silence me, then let's see you try!"

In that split second, murderous intent flashed from her left, right, and behind. Lina instantly jumped diagonally backward, rolled on the ground, and stayed low!

Clang-clang-clang!

"Wha-aaaa-aaa!?"

Along with a hard, sharp sound, Furness's scream echoed in the area. The projectiles thrown by the surrounding men had flown over Lina's ducking head, and several had rained down around Furness instead.

"Th-That's dangerous!"

By the time she screamed, Lina had already pulled herself up and dived into the thicket.

"She’s trying to escape!"

"After her! Catch her!"

The men shouted and gave chase. *Hmph! Too easy! If I were to run away from a bunch of losers like this, the name of Lina Inverse would be disgraced!*

Lina's plan was to lure them into the forest and take them out one by one. She could have blasted them with an attack spell earlier, but there was a risk of a few of them slipping away. Rather than pursuing and destroying an enemy who realizes they're at a disadvantage and flees, it’s better to make them think they have the upper hand and take them down when they come chasing after you in high spirits—that way, none of them escape.

The men carelessly stomped into the depths of the thicket—

"Windy Shield!" (Bomb Di Wind!)

Whoosh!

"Whoaaaaa!?"

In an instant, the blow that swept away several men who had stepped into the thicket was not launched by Lina.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! If you thought only one person was following you, you were greatly mistaken, Furness!"

Standing on a treetop against the moon, letting out a laugh that silenced even the bugs, was none other than Naga the White Serpent!

"W-Why are you here too!? ...Hah! That means!"

Furness’s flustered gaze darted around—

"Exactly."

She turned her eyes toward the voice and was left speechless. Standing there, blending into the night, was Furness's superior, Chief Ireneia!

I see... for a moment I thought Naga had just caught the scent of trouble by instinct, but it's nothing like that. Two others were tailing Furness just like me.

Because Lina's attention had been on Furness and the men—and later, their attention had been on Lina—the two of them had arrived here almost completely unnoticed.

"To be honest, I had noticed your attitude was strange lately. On the day you were working overtime—something you don't usually do—the experimental animals 'accidentally' escaped on their own. And as if timed for that moment, an unidentified organization moved to capture them—there was no way I wouldn't look at you with suspicion. Now that it's come to this, prepare yourself; there's no talking your way out of it."

"Noooooo! My perfect plan!"

"It was full of holes!"

Everyone chimed in at once to Furness's scream.

"What do you intend to do!? Now that things are like this..."

"...A-Anyway! Even if I'm found out, I don't think there's any problem with continuing the plan. If I catch the remaining animals and go over to that side, I can even teach them the experimental data and stuff!"

Furness answered one of the men.

"I see. And come to think of it—if we erase the people here, the plan can proceed without any issues—"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Try it if you can! Ice Arrow!"

Crack-thwack!

"Gwaaaaah!"

Before the man could even finish his sentence, Naga's strike hit several more of them directly. *Geez! If it's come to this, I guess I have to join the fray too!*

"Vibration Blast!" (Damu Brass!)

Boom!

"Guh!"

Lina blew one man away and headed toward the enemy. Her first target—Furness. There were two reasons. First, she would be the easiest to crack to find out who had approached her to sell the experiments. And second...

More than anything, she couldn't forgive her for trying to trick and use *her*! And what's more! For an extra payment of only one gold coin per head! At this point, she had no choice but to beat her senseless!

Catching a glimpse of the flustered Furness as her allies were being knocked down one after another, Lina released a spell!

"Ice Arrow!"

At Lina's voice, Furness whipped around. Realizing that the approaching swarm of ice arrows was impossible to avoid, her face was overcome with shock—

Whoosh!

In an instant—a sudden gale blew, scattering the swarm of frozen arrows and making everyone stand staggered.

"Ugh!?"

Creeeeak!

Amidst several screams, the sound of living trees groaning and breaking echoed.

"What is that!?" Ireneia shouted in shock.

And then.

—Hoo.

The low, echoing sound came from that thing. Yes. Unable to withstand its own weight, it snapped the branch it was perched on and landed on the ground with a *thump*—it was one giant owl.

It was about the same size as the rabbit they had seen earlier.

"The third one!?"

At Furness's voice, the owl's face turned toward her.

—Hoo.

With a single cry, it flapped its wings. Whether it was attached to her or wanted to attack, it headed straight for her!

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Furness hurriedly turned her back and ran. She seemed able to use attack spells, but using them would damage the owl—the very bargaining chip they needed.

—Thinking about it, the Sleep spell she had cast on everyone while they were being chased by the rabbit probably hadn't been an accident, but a deliberate move.

The owl chased the fleeing Furness. Ireneia and Naga began running after the owl as well.

"Naga-san! Please!"

"Hmph! Wind Shield!" (Bomb Di Wind!)

Whoosh!

The explosive pressure of the wind erupted in front of Naga—toward the fleeing Furness, the owl, and Ireneia, who was one step ahead!

"Ky-aaaaaaa!?"

Leaves scattered and branches snapped. Ireneia and Furness were blown away with them. But the owl itself only stumbled unsteadily, perhaps due to its weight. The moment the unbalanced owl hurriedly flapped its wings a few times to regain its posture—

"Freeze Arrow!" (Freeze Arrow!)

Crack!

From behind Naga, Lina's cold spell froze the owl's right wing to a nearby tree trunk. *Alright! That stopped its movement!*

"Sleep!" (Sleeping!)

With Lina's subsequent spell, the owl fell into a deep slumber right where it was. *Yes! Capture successful!*

...Wait, now that I think about it, since I know Furness is a traitor, I'm not going to get a bonus for capturing it alive anyway...

"...W-We did it. That's one..."

Ireneia returned, looking a bit worse for wear.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! With the power of Naga the White Serpent, it's child's play!"

"You weren't the one who caught it!"

"Hmph. You don't understand, Lina Inverse! I created the opening so you could land your spell! That contribution is immense! In other words, I basically caught it!"

"Again with the nonsense..."

"More importantly...!"

At Ireneia’s intervention, the bickering duo stopped.

"Where are Furness and the others?"

"...Huh?"

Looking around, Furness and the men had vanished from the area.

—Tch! They got away!

Sigh...

Ireneia took a deep breath and turned to Lina.

"In any case... now that Furness's defection is clear, Lina-san, I want you to assist us from here on out. You don't mind, do you?"

"Well... I don't mind, but... how should I put it, what happens to the reward in that case?"

"I see—as for the disposal of the animals, it's the same as before: ten gold coins per disposal—"

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?"

Lina shouted, cutting her off.

"T-T-Ten gold coins each!?"

"...Yes... but..." Ireneia nodded, looking confused.

...Th-That brat! Furness said it was five coins per head, with an extra one for a live capture...!

Which means she was planning to pocket a huge cut! That girl! I will seriously never forgive you, Furness!

As Lina burned with solitary rage, Ireneia faltered slightly.

"...A-Anyway, ten gold coins per head. Aside from that—now that things have come to this, we can't let Furness and her crew run free. I want to catch her and retrieve the two animals they captured this afternoon. I’d like you to lend your strength to that—as for the reward for that part, I'll speak with my superiors and have them work something out. How does that sound?"

"Of course, it's a deal! No complaints!"

Lina nodded without a second thought.

"Hmph. Then naturally, you'll make appropriate arrangements for my request fee as well, right?"

"Yes. Of course," Ireneia nodded to Naga's question.

Hmm... teaming up with Naga makes me a little uneasy... but if I can smack Furness around, I'll overlook the details for now!

"So, Ireneia, I want to ask—are there any large caves or ruins in the mountains around here?"

"Caves or ruins?"

"Exactly. The fact that those guys who caught two animals are hanging around at this hour means there must be a place nearby where they can hide animals of that size. That's undoubtedly where their hideout is."

"...A large... cave..."

Ireneia thought for a moment at Lina's question.

"...I'm sorry, nothing comes to mind. Well, it might just be that I don't know about it. It might be best to ask people who work in the mountains..."

"Hmm..."

I see... so it's going to be a tedious investigation...

"...We don't have much time... They probably want to get all five... but now that Furness has been exposed, they won't risk coming to the Association to steal the one we caught... They'll probably move at full speed to catch the remaining two... once they have them, they'll likely vanish immediately. If that happens, it's game over."

"The time remaining is short..."

The three of them fell into silence at Ireneia's mutter—

"I was reeeeally lucky."

Furness's carefree voice as usual echoed inside the cave. In the dark, vast space, the only light was a single magical light she had conjured. Although she had increased its brightness, it wasn't enough for a cave so massive that dragons could sleep in it by the dozen, and most of the area remained submerged in darkness.

"I didn't think I'd bump into the third—no, the fourth one so suddenly."

"One remains—"

A man's voice followed Furness's.

"As for the one that fell into their hands last night, we have no choice but to give it up. We can't exactly go steal it from the Association. I'm telling you now, your reward will be reduced by that amount."

"That's so mean. I said I'd go over there and help you out, so please give me a little extra. Please."

"In the first place, this is all because you messed up and let the experimental animals escape for real. Thanks to that, we had to go through the extra trouble of capturing them. It's only natural that you pay the price for your blunder."

"Ehhhh, no way."

"If you have a complaint, make sure you catch the last one. We'll talk after that."

"No. This talk is over."

!?

The movement of Furness and the men froze at the sound of a third voice.

"Th-That voice is!"

"That's right."

From out of the darkness, the trio of Lina, Naga, and Ireneia stepped toward them.

"How did you find this place!?"

The man who had been talking to Furness—likely the leader—raised his voice in surprise. Indeed, if this cave were large enough to house dragon-sized animals from the start, word would have reached the mountain workers and they would have been found easily. However, this place seemed to be an ordinary cave that had been expanded using Earth Spirit Magic or something similar. They probably thought it was a perfect hideout for four or five days until they could slip away without being rumored...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I'll tell you if you want to know!"

Letting out a single burst of her laugh, Naga stepped forward and pointed sharply at the animal cage behind Furness—which was partitioned by giant bars like pillars.

"The one you caught today was a trap we set—a decoy! We had it wander around, and you came crawling out to catch it! We let you catch it quietly, and then we tracked its presence to find this place!"

Naga declared grandly. At the tip of her finger, inside the cage, was a giant, wriggling land jellyfish.

"Tracked its presence!? What does that mean!?"

"Ah—don't worry about it. We don't really get it either."

Lina answered the man's question somewhat dismissively. Last night, after Furness and her crew escaped, Lina had asked Ireneia what the remaining two animals were, and the answer was a jellyfish and a turtle. Thinking it was worth a shot, she asked Naga, who said the jellyfish might listen to her because of her charisma. When she asked her to try, the land jellyfish actually came, which was completely incomprehensible. Furthermore, apparently Naga could track the giant jellyfish's location by its presence if she put her mind to it.

With that, there was only one course of action: let them catch the jellyfish on purpose and track its presence to find their hideout! Thus the plan was set into motion and was a complete success.

...Ordinary people can't understand the theoretical process, though...

"Anyway. Whether you understand the logic or not, the fact that you've been cornered is undeniable. So, how about you let yourselves be beaten senseless quietly!?"

"I don't think so!"

As she spoke, Furness threw her magical light toward them! Of course, it had no attack power. However, if their side went dark and Lina’s side was lit up, it would be easy for them to see Lina, while Lina would find it hard to see them. There was no need to say who would have the advantage in a fight. In that case, staying here was a disadvantage!

"Scatter! Destroy them at your own discretion!"

Lina dashed off, and simultaneously, Naga and Ireneia ran as well.

"Fire Arrow!" (Flare Arrow!)

Furness's spell flew toward them! It was heading for Ireneia! Lina couldn't make it in time to follow up!

Boom-boom-boom!

"Kyaaaaaaaa!?"

See, I didn't make it in time! But she probably didn't die, so it's fine!

Quickly giving up on that, Lina unleashed her own spell toward Furness—where the fire arrows had just come from!

"Fire Arrow!" (Flare Arrow!)

An eye for an eye, a Fire Arrow for a Fire Arrow! A dozen lines of fire cut through the darkness and landed!

"Gwaaaaah!?"

However, Furness's voice was not among the screams. *Tch! I missed!*

"Ice Arrow!" (Freeze Arrow!)

Naga's spell flew toward the same spot next!

"Guh!"

But again, Furness's voice wasn't among the cries. *No way—did she escape into the darkness!?*

That's bad! If she escapes, I won't be able to relieve my stress by beating her up! Lina hurriedly chanted a spell—

"Lighting!" (Lighting!)

She released the magical light she had created toward the same direction as the Fire Arrows. It illuminated several men who had fallen and two men who were looking around in confusion.

"Freeze Arrow!" (Freeze Arrow!)

Crack!

Those two were easily frozen by Naga's next strike.

—But—Furness was nowhere to be found in the light. Apparently, after firing the first Fire Arrow, she had dashed away from the spot. *Tch! Did she get away!*

Just as Lina thought that.

—O fury of spirits that sleep in the wind and earth—

The voice chanting the spell could be heard from somewhere.

"Furness!"

Lina hurriedly looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen. She was likely hiding in the shadows, chanting her spell while staying perfectly still. *This is bad!*

That spell was Dug-Ra-Vey! It was a wide-range lightning spell; while its lethality was low, it was enough to leave them incapacitated for a while. Also, because it was truly wide-range, it was almost impossible to escape even if she dashed. *—What should I do!?*

While she hesitated, the chant continued.

—Now turn your power into lightning, connecting heaven and earth as one, and from the wind— Grip.

"...Ri-grip!?"

Of course, there was no such weird spell. With that, Furness's voice went silent. Not knowing what had happened, Lina frowned, and then Naga walked casually into the light.

"Hmph. It’s over, Lina."

"...Huh?"

At her words, Lina approached and looked—

She had probably been hiding behind a pillar of the cage. There was Furness, her neck being squeezed by the tentacle of the giant land jellyfish through the bars, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"For now, everything is finished."

Ireneia, with bandages wrapped in various places as if some damage from the Fire Arrows remained, visited Lina and Naga’s inn the next day during afternoon tea.

"The buyer for the experimental animals was a magic-user living in a nearby town... the one who was the leader of the men. I’ve handed him and Furness over to the officials. All five experimental animals have been safely retrieved."

"Five?"

Lina frowned at her words.

"Wasn't there one more? Did someone else catch it...?"

"That's not it. The remaining one was a giant turtle type. Actually, it had been sleeping on the mountain behind the Association with its head and limbs pulled into

its shell... it seems everyone thought it was a rock for golem experiments and didn't notice it."

"...Oh, come on..." *Someone should have noticed...*

"Anyway, that's how it is. The ones you caught were Owl No. 18 and Jellyfish No. 15. At ten gold coins per head, that’s twenty total. As for how you split it—I'll leave that to the two of you."

With that, she took a small leather pouch from her bosom and placed it on the table. Lina and Naga’s gazes crossed for a moment, invisible sparks flying. It was obvious that the two of them would bicker over the split of these twenty gold coins, but the question was the degree of the bickering. Whether it would be a battle to the death or a simple shouting match—that depended on Ireneia’s answer to Lina’s next question.

"...So... about that..."

Lina swallowed hard and asked her.

"What about the reward for taking down Furness and her crew? You said you'd speak with your superiors, right?"

"Yes." Ireneia nodded with a smile at Lina’s words. "I spoke with them properly. But they said they still couldn't pay."

.....

At those flatly spoken words, Lina and Naga were silent for a moment—and then, the roar of an attack spell echoed through the town.

Thus, the incident came to an end. However, now that the incident was over, one question remained unresolved in Lina’s mind like a lingering knot. That is—was that research of pointlessly making animals giant, which seemed completely useless, really worth all that fuss between enemies and allies? That mystery remained unsolved.

(The Mountain of Giant Creatures: The End)

Before the Storm

I stopped my pace at a familiar presence. It was an ordinary town, neither particularly large nor small, with no distinct features. It was a corner where no one passed, slightly off the main street.

"...So? What do you want, Maria?"

In response to my voice, a twelve or thirteen-year-old cute girl with black hair suddenly popped out from behind a corner.

"As expected of you, Lina-san. To notice my tailing."

The smile she wore was one of innocent goodwill. But I knew. I knew that she was a handful to deal with. Not an enemy—not right now. I had once had a bit of trouble with a man she was apprenticed to. In the end, Maria left him and the incident was over—or so it should have been. But now that several days had passed, I honestly had no idea why this girl was following me.

"...Don't tell me you're still holding a grudge about that time..."

At my words, she however shrugged with a bitter smile.

"No. I've already graduated from being a woman who lives in the past."

What kind of life have you led, you twelve-year-old?

"Certainly, the last man was a disappointment. But I've found a new target... I mean, victim... no, prey... wait, quarry... well..."

".....Could it be..... love?"

"Yes! That's it!"

At my words, she pointed sharply at me.

"I've found a new love!"

"...Maria... I hate to say it, but I don't think that's love."

"Why do you have to decide that!? I'm serious!"

"...Well... I won't pry too deep... so... is this 'person you found' also wealthy...?"

"You figured it out well."

Of course you would. I gave a deep sigh.

"No, I just kind of thought so. Well, I'm glad you found someone good. ...So? When does this story connect to me?"

"Right away. This gentleman I found is a nice person... but actually, right now, he's being seduced by a wicked woman and is completely taken with her. So, I was wondering if Lina-san could, on a moonless night... Hey! Why are you walking away!?"

"...Well, if someone asks for an assassination so casually, I have no choice but to pretend I didn't hear it."

Having failed my attempt to sneak away, I was forced to stop.

"What are you saying? I never said you had to take her life! That's right. Not her *life*."

A wicked smile played on her lips.

"...Don't give me that scary smile! But you... don't you think your personality has gotten even more warped than when we last met?"

"...Are you trying to pick a fight, Lina-san...?"

Maria's eyes narrowed. *Ah, crap. Getting her angry for no reason and ending up in a fight would be all pain and no gain.*

I scratched my cheek and said in a deliberately breezy tone:

"No, it's not like that... but compared to when you were just following him around, I thought you were being too proactive this time, or rather, strangely aggressive. Thinking of doing something to the woman he's interested in..."

"Because! That woman is the type you'd definitely be unhappy with if you fell in love with her!"

In a way that was finally child-like, she puffed out her cheeks.

"She’s tall, has a large chest, and wears weird clothes! I mean, she has spiked shoulder guards..."

"Pfft!"

I didn't even need to hear the rest. I sprayed my drink with all my might.

Wait... is it HER!?

"I... I get it, Maria!" I marched over and placed a firm hand on Maria's shoulder.

"...Eh?"

"I don't care who that guy ends up falling for later! But I can't just stand by and watch someone step into the abyss! I'll take care of that idiot woman for you, once and for all!"

"Huh? What?"

Leaving the bewildered Maria behind, I turned toward a distant horizon, clenched my right fist, and made my solemn vow.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho—*urk!*"

KRA-DOOOOM!

The moment I stepped through the door of the diner, my finishing kick connected squarely with the head of the creature that was letting out an idiotic laugh. The object fell to the floor, twitched for a few moments, stopped moving entirely, and then—

Fwump! It suddenly sat upright.

"Lina! What was that for, out of nowhere!?"

The person shouting was none other than the woman with the needlessly high skin-exposure, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace. It was the wandering, freeloading sorceress whose very existence is a question mark: Naga the White Serpent!

"Don't mind me, Naga. I just felt like exterminating something."

It was a diner near evening. I spoke with a straight face while the other customers sent us looks filled with subtle nuances, but in life, you have to ignore the small details.

"More importantly, Naga, is it true you're being courted by some guy?"

"Could that perhaps be... referring to me?"

A voice suddenly came from the side. I turned to see a man sitting at another seat at Naga's table. He looked to be in his early twenties. He was quite handsome, with wavy blonde hair and refined clothes. However, the way he was idly playing with a rose in one hand and posing dramatically was incredibly suspicious.

"You're the one?" I sent a sharp glare his way.

"My name is Kaimum Iliol. A pleasure to meet you, ladies."

He gave a theatrical bow to me—and to Maria, who was half-hiding behind me, acting like the perfect little angel.

"However... 'courting' is a bit of a misunderstanding. I certainly understand and praise Naga-san's charms, but it is by no means something common or vulgar."

"Whatever," I said, patting his shoulder. "Just stop. If you don't want to be miserable, give it up."

"Wait, Lina!? What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Calm down, Naga. I'm just stating a general rule: people who get involved with you and *don't* end up miserable are a rare breed."

Naga's eyebrows twitched at my calm observation—but she quickly put on a confident smirk.

"Hmph! I see through you, Lina! You've realized my looks, ability, and sense are finally being recognized, and you're trying to sabotage me out of jealousy! Good grief. I suppose when a person's chest is small, their heart becomes small too.
Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Ugh, so annoying!"

"—Please, wait. Both of you."

Kaimum, still holding the rose and posing strangely, stepped between Naga and me.

"Ah... please stop. Don't fight over me..."

"...I'm not doing this for you."

Ignoring my dead-eyed response, he flourished the rose. "Does my very existence drive women's hearts to such madness!?"

"...Hey, wait."

"Is beauty a vice or a virtue! Two women fighting over me! This reality is far too cruel to be called fate!"

"We aren't fighting over you!" I shouted, pointing directly at Maria. "Maria here was worried you were going to lose your way as a human by getting caught up with Naga! That's the only reason I'm here!"

"—Is that so, lovely young lady?"

Kaimum knelt down and offered the rose to Maria. "I am honored that you care so much for me. In that case, I shall respond to those feelings—"

"Don't respond!"

Wham.

My heel came down squarely on Kaimum’s head.

"You! What are you saying to a child!? You're just making things complicated!"

"Hmph. What are you talking about? For a philanthropist like me, a lady's age is irrelevant! From five to ninety, they are all within my acceptable range!"

"Oh... how wonderful..." Maria took the rose and looked at him with moist, sparkling eyes.

"Wait, you! That just means you have no standards! And Maria! Don't let your eyes sparkle!"

Ignoring my shouting, he suddenly struck a pose of agony. "Ah...! But I cannot choose just one from these three wonderful ladies! It's too cruel...!"

"I told you, no one is—wait, three!? Hey! Am I included in that count!?"

"If I cannot choose, then I must let the three of you decide! The 'Kaimum Iliol Struggle' has begun! Very well. I shall set the stage to ensure fairness!"

"Hey! Didn't you just say to stop fighting—"

"The prize money is 200 gold coins."

"I'll do it!" the three of us shouted in unison.

"...How did it come to this...?" I muttered gloomily after Kaimum had left the diner.

I was grateful he paid for the meal, but he certainly left a mess behind. 200 gold coins. I'd lost my cool at the mention of such a delicious amount and blurted out that I’d do it... but in the end, it meant a three-way battle between me, Naga, and Maria. Honestly, it was dangerous.

However, the ten gold coins he'd given each of us as a "preparation fee" were already in my pocket. It would be a shame to return them now, and besides, I didn't even know where Kaimum was.

"...Seriously..." Maria said, sending a resentful look my way. "To think even Lina-san would fall for Kaimum-sama..."

"I haven't, I haven't." I waved my hand dismissively. "I'm only in it for the 200 gold coins. I'll take the prize, but you can have the man."

"Hmph. Agreed," Naga said, tossing her hair. "I'll praise him for recognizing my sense and talent, but he's not my type."

I didn't really want to imagine what Naga's "type" was. Regardless, it seemed Naga and I were on the same page.

"So, no problem, right, Maria? At least Naga and I aren't interested in the guy."

"Yes, there is," Maria puffed out her cheeks. "Because if either of you wins, the money that should be mine will be 200 coins shorter."

"Wow, how stingy!"

"Perfectly calculated greed," Naga and I said.

I took a sip of my remaining juice. "...But Maria, it's not really my business, but... are you sure about him?"

"About what?"

I suppressed a sigh. "I mean... even if you manage to marry into wealth, do you really want a guy who's okay with any woman 'from the cradle to the grave'?"

"Isn't it great? He has no prejudice against age. More importantly, he's rich and seems easy to handle."

"...But having a husband like that... won't you have a lot of trouble? With cheating and all..."

Maria smiled brightly. "It's fine. As long as he leaves behind what needs to be left behind."

Scary! Naga and I both recoiled. Did Maria's "love" come with a prerequisite of assassinating her partner?

...Anyway, it was too terrifying to pry further. I started thinking that maybe letting this poisonous spider of a girl hook up with that shallow guy might be for the best—it would keep them both from causing trouble for the rest of the world.

"Anyway, I won't let either of you get in the way of me and Kaimum-sama," she said with an adorable smile that felt like both a challenge and a threat.

"Welcome! My beloved ladies!"

About five days later, Kaimum greeted us with his usual roses and cringy poses.

"...'Welcome' is fine, but... what is this place?" Naga muttered, looking around in dissatisfaction.

It was understandable. We had been led into some kind of underground area. We had turned left and right through long tunnels, going up and down, until we reached a place where five thick doors stood illuminated by lamplight. It was so suspicious it made me want to fire an attack spell without asking questions.

"It’s the stage I’ve prepared for you with all my heart! I want you to pick a door and proceed! There’s another door at the end, and beyond that is the first attraction! Clear that, and it's the finals! Simple, right, ladies!?"

"I understand, Kaimum-sama," Maria said, her eyes moist and shimmering. Of course, they were shimmering with the ambition of marrying into wealth, not love.

"By the way, the 200 gold coins prize—that's real, right?"

"Of course," he answered immediately. "I would never betray you. The prize isn't here, but it will undoubtedly be paid to the winner. Now! Prize money and my love await! Proceed without fear!"

"...Well, I don't care about the love..." but the prize was definitely attractive.

"Understood," Maria was the first to step forward. As she headed for the middle door, she said, "I'll definitely win, so look forward to it, Kaimum-sama."

"I’ll be waiting, my cute lady. ...Oh? What about the other two? Will you return the preparation money and forfeit?"

"Hmph! As if!" Naga fell for the provocation and stepped forward. "The 200 gold coins belong to me, Naga the White Serpent! Ho-ho-ho-ho!" She went for the door on the far right.

...Well, fine. I was already in this deep. With a sigh, I stepped through the second door from the left.

A long, narrow corridor. It was likely underground; the ceiling and walls were boarded up, but the air was damp and cold. Candlesticks were lit here and there, providing just enough light to walk. After walking through the twisting corridor for a while, I saw a thick door similar to the one at the entrance.

The moment I opened it—

WRAAAAAAAAH!

Dazzling light and cheering washed over me. The magical lights illuminating the area were blinding to eyes accustomed to the dim corridor. It was a circular, plaza-like area. High iron bars surrounded it, and further up were spectator seats filled with people wearing masquerade-style masks, shouting.

Behind me, the door slammed shut. ...Wait... this is...

"Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for waiting!" A man's clear, loud voice echoed through the space. "The one who chose this route is a beautiful young sorceress! She lacks sex appeal and a chest, but how is her skill!?"

The audience burst into laughter. *They're really enjoying that, aren't they?*

"Then let us begin! Facing her is—THIS!"

As he spoke, a section of the iron bars rattled open. Beyond was pitch-black darkness. Carried on the wind blowing from within was a raw smell and the growl of a beast. And then—with heavy footsteps, a giant **Ogre** emerged into the light!

Ogres are ill-tempered, possess speed that belies their size, and power that matches it. To make matters worse, they're carnivorous. They often cause damage to livestock—and sometimes humans—in towns and villages. Traveling warriors are often hired to deal with them, but they are tough opponents for novice warriors or mages.

"Against a ferociously incomparable Ogre, what will happen to her!? Now..."

"Dill Brand!" (Earth spirit shockwave)

Wham!

Without waiting for the announcer to finish, a single attack spell from me easily knocked the Ogre flat.

.....Silence.....

A brief hush fell, followed by a murmur of dissatisfaction—rather than cheers—from the audience.

"...Th-That was amazing!" the announcer shouted, trying to salvage the mood. "One hit! Exactly one hit! To take down a ferocious Ogre in a single blow! Amazing, amazing!"

He was trying his best to hype it up, but the truth was that the fight—if you could even call it that—was a complete letdown as entertainment. The audience's reaction was lukewarm at best.

"But ladies and gentlemen! This was merely an opening act, a diversion! The real battle starts now! A girl with this much power will next face someone of equal strength! Now, what will happen!?"

The bars the Ogre had come through closed, and another set opened. *Go this way,* it seemed to say.

...Well... I could go on a rampage here, but I might as well play along a little longer. I turned and stepped through the bars.

The next area was another circular plaza, but it was twice as large as the previous one. Spectators filled the seats around us. No doubt about it—this was a **Colosseum**.

Three figures stood in the arena. Me. Maria, covered in Ogre blood. And Naga, covered in Ogre bite marks.

"...As expected..." Maria said, licking the blood from her lip. *She's terrifying*. "Against something like that, no one would drop out, would they?" There was a look of ecstasy in her eyes. *This girl is seriously scary!*

But I couldn't show weakness here. "...Whatever, do something about your appearance. You smell like raw meat."

"Oh, right..." She chanted a short spell. "Aqua Create!" (Purifying Water).

Water extracted from the void appeared above her head. *Splash!* The water drenched her, washing away the blood.

In that instant: "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems both of you reached this point safely!" Naga's laugh echoed, even over the crowd.

—I was the only one who noticed that Naga had been standing there unconscious from the sight of Maria's blood until just a moment ago. Showing no sign of it, Naga puffed out her chest.

"But! No matter how much you struggle, the 200 gold coins are destined for me, Naga the White Serpent!"

"Whoa! The contestants are already sparking!"

"—That voice—"

"Kaimum-sama!"

Our voices followed the announcement. Yes, although he wasn't visible, it was Kaimum's voice echoing through the arena. His tone was different, likely his "business" voice. His voice, amplified by wind magic, continued.

"Beautiful and lovely ladies! But as you all saw, their hidden strength is real! All three defeated those ferocious Ogres without much trouble!"

"—One of them got bitten!—" someone jeered, causing laughter.

"That was just for flavor. Now, ladies and gentlemen, which lady will you cheer for!?"

The audience's eyes fixed on us. ...Okay, it's about time. I took a deep breath.

"—So you're the scout and the announcer for the finals! Kaimum! ...Though I don't know if that's your real name!"

.....Silence.....

The arena went quiet for a second at my shout.

"You lure women into town, talk them into coming to this underground arena, and then you have them fight Ogres for the amusement of bored, wealthy guests with bad taste! ...Occasionally someone beats the Ogres, and then you have them fight someone suitable in this main arena. You use it as entertainment and a gambling ring to fund an underground organization—isn't that right!?"

"Underground organization!?"

"Then we... are being used as pawns for underground fights!?" Naga and Maria chimed in.

...Wait... you guys didn't realize until now? Naga, fine, but even Maria... she must have been so focused on marrying into wealth she wasn't thinking at all...

"My, my... what an unkind thing to say," Kaimum's voice echoed again. "Under the systems made by narrow-minded commoners, no facility exists that can satisfy our guests' refined tastes! We simply understood that and built this facility to meet those needs. It's as simple as that! Besides, you say I tricked you, but I did not. You weren't forced here; you came for the prize money. And I told you beforehand that you would be fighting, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did! But you didn't mention *what* we'd be fighting or how dangerous it was!"

"And you didn't ask what you'd be fighting or how dangerous it was either. ...So, what will you do? Will you give up the 200 gold coins and forfeit?"

I looked at Naga and Maria. Especially Maria. She looked down and thought. "...If Kaimum-sama is just a scout for underground fights... then there's no marrying into wealth..."

...Hmm...

"—Kaimum! The 200 gold coins prize—that's definitely for real, isn't it!?"

"Of course! The winner will be paid 200 gold coins, no doubt about it!" Kaimum answered immediately.

"—There you have it," I said, slowly moving while measuring the distance. "If we fight and win as he says, one of us gets the money."

"—Hmph. I see." Naga also began moving slowly to keep her distance.

"...I see... so we have to do it." Maria's eyes sharpened as she began to move.

"...I'll turn you to cinders."

The moment I stopped, the other two stopped as well.

"It seems they're all fired up! Now! Who will be the one standing!? It's time for the finals—FIGHT!"

At Kaimum's signal, we all began chanting at once. Our voices harmonized—

"Fireball!" (Fireball!)

We all cast the same spell. The three spheres of light pierced the air—

KA-BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The heat and flames exploded! It wasn't us who were blown away, but the arena walls. Plus a few spectators.

The audience began screaming. "Wh-What...!?" Kaimum stammered.

We ignored him and began our next chant.

"...E-Enough! If that's how it is, I don't care! Do it!" Kaimum shouted, finally realizing our intent.

Under his command, hidden archers were supposed to rain arrows down on the three of us—but that didn't happen.

"What's wrong!? Do it!"

The only response was our attack spells. Flames roared, winds swirled, and cold air engulfed the fleeing guests.

Crash! The iron bars were bent and the thick stone walls shattered. Beyond was a hidden room where Kaimum and about ten men were cowering.

"...Why...?"

"It's the natural conclusion, don't you think?" I said to Kaimum, who was muttering in his normal voice since the magic had broken.

We had no obligation to follow the whims of someone trying to trick people into fighting for sport. I'd noticed the archers hiding around the arena since we arrived.

Naga and Maria probably had too. In other words, if we had refused to fight, they would have turned us into pincushions.

And if we fought and won, would we have actually gotten the money? Very doubtful. Their "entertainment" was more of a murder show than a fight. Because it was us, the Ogres were easy, but ordinary warriors would have been slaughtered. There was no guarantee the winner's life would be spared. Once the winner was exhausted and let their guard down to take the prize, the hidden archers would have finished them off—that was likely the plan.

So, we pretended to agree to fight, but our first blow was to take out the hidden archers. Detecting their presence and locations was easy for us. To avoid our spells interfering with each other, I used "turn you to cinders" as a code to unify our first strike as fire magic. Success.

"Besides—" I said. "Rather than fighting these two for 200 gold coins, it's easier and more profitable to crush your organization and take everything."

"Hmph...! You certainly... underestimate us...!" Kaimum stepped out of the hidden room. In his hand, he held several knives that gleamed dully. He brushed back his hair with his free hand.

"Saying it's easier to crush my organization... I admit your skill in taking down the Ogre, but that overconfidence is a bit much. —Of course—" Kaimum gave a small sneer. "It would be a different story if you had the power of someone like the legendary Bandit-Killer, Lina Inverse."

.....

We all slumped our shoulders in disbelief. I scratched my cheek. "Um... excuse me..."

"What is it?"

"That's me."

.....

Awkward silence. Kaimum froze in mid-pose.

"Naga was calling me 'Lina' back at the diner, wasn't she?"

.....

"—Did you think I was just someone else with the same name? Because I didn't match the image you had from the rumors?"

.....

"Ah, thought so. A lot of people make that mistake."

"...Are... you serious...?" Kaimum finally broke out of his long stupor, his voice trembling.

I smiled brightly. "Well, I'm about to prove it."

...Let's just say his organization was far too weak to handle the three of us.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! This wasn't bad at all!" In a room at an inn, Naga let out her usual laugh in front of a pile of gold and silver treasures. Normally her voice is just grating, but right now I didn't care.

Everyone was in high spirits because we'd taken way more loot from the crushed organization than expected. We'd taken an inn in town and were currently in the middle of splitting the treasure.

"To think Kaimum was actually the boss. I thought he was just a low-level lackey. He was pretty diligent, doing everything from scouting to announcing." I was handing out the gold coins we'd "appropriated"—I mean, confiscated so they couldn't be used to rebuild the organization.

Maria smiled happily. "Truly. If I'd known that from the start, I might have considered sticking with the plan of marrying into wealth."

Twitch. Naga and I both froze. An underground organization with *her* helping out... I didn't even want to imagine it. She'd probably do things so cruel it'd be life-ending. But well—that possibility was gone now.

"Anyway, evil is vanished and the case is closed—" My words froze in my throat. My hand stopped moving.

Naga and Maria noticed something was wrong and looked at me. Then they noticed too. When you split the coins between the three of us, there was one gold coin left over.

Silence. And then:

"Ah..."

"Hmph. It seems..."

"One is left over, isn't it?"

"Hahahahahaha!" A pleasant—or rather, a pleasant-*sounding*—laugh.

"But one gold coin is like pocket money for a child, isn't it?" Maria said sweetly.

"Hmph. But giving a child too much isn't good for their education. Isn't it more important to respect your elders?" Naga said, puffing out her chest.

"By the way, I was the one who noticed they were an underground organization and pointed it out, wasn't I?" I said in a friendly tone.

Silence again. And then:

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

This time, all pleasantry had vanished from the laughter. Everyone realized it. No one had any intention of giving up that one coin. The real battle was about to begin.

And when the laughter died, ignoring any trouble for the neighbors, the fight to the death over a single gold coin began...

(Before the Storm: The End)

Afterword

Author: Next news item. *Slayers Special Vol. 17: A small but rich melody* by Hajime Kanzaka is now officially on sale.

L: In response, the U.S. Department of Defense has expressed its regret.

Author: Is this bad news!? Is it already an international incident!?

L: ...You're going to have a hard time from here on... with the CIA chasing you and all...

Author: Don't pat me on the shoulder! Don't pity me! That's not how this is going to go!

L: Eh!? You mean after coming this far, you're going to betray the readers' expectations now!?

Author: No one is expecting that!

L: Look. This is actually the first Slayers book of the 21st century. We should have some big new development here.

Author: As if! And you've got the way to do a "new development" all wrong! ...Hmm. But now that I think about it, it really is the first of the 21st century. Whether it's the year 2000 or the 21st century, it all arrived so casually it doesn't quite sink in.

L: Right? You need one or two catastrophes...

Author: We don't need those! Go home! Go back quietly! Peace is best for the world. Though stagnation isn't good either. —So, the usual topic. To commemorate the 21st century, the 2001 New Year's card featured the original art of the "Chibi L" version: *Magical Girl L-chan: Transform with the Spiked Magic Hammer!*

L: She transforms!?

Author: You bet! A multi-stage transformation that would make sponsors (which we don't have) weep with joy. Both age and weapon upgrade:

2 years old: Toy Hammer → 8 years old: Spiked Hammer → 14 years old: Scythe of Death → 20 years old: A washbasin full of water from the Edo Castle outer moat!

L: That's the ultimate weapon!?

Author: Of course, the outer moat water is the summer version! Water from the lower reaches of the Neyagawa River in summer is also acceptable!

L: For people who don't know, just imagine water left out in the blazing sun for ten days with dead fish and moss in it... wait... that really *is* the ultimate weapon... or rather, it sounds like the ultimate bio-weapon...

Author: It brings back memories... (distant look). A few years ago in summer, when I went to Tokyo for reasons. That raw s-m-e-l-l wafting through a slightly cracked car window. Now it's just a bad memory.

L: Is it bad?

Author: Of course it's bad! Even where I live now, on summer nights depending on the wind, the lukewarm, raw air unique to the lower Neyagawa River drifts over. In any case, its spot as the strongest is unshakable. A woman standing in the shadow of a telephone pole, holding a washbasin full of that nasty water. Scary! If I were a cop, I'd run away without a second thought.

L: ...I... really want you to do something about the visuals. If a few years from now, your New Year's card to readers has a drawing of me holding a washbasin, I don't know what I'll do...

Author: Hmm. Honestly, I don't want to draw that either. So what should we do?

L: What do you mean... we have to change the ultimate weapon. Something that suits me and highlights my beauty, something that looks good in a drawing, like a sword or a spear.

Author: Hmm. A weapon that suits you... how about a cabbage covered in pesticides?

L: Ho-ho... so you think I'd look good as a campaign girl for local agricultural products? Fine, let's see which is stronger: this container full of imported cabbages or the author's head!

Author: Wait—!

(Sound of things colliding. Sound of things breaking. Sound of things colliding. Sound of things breaking. Repeat indefinitely.)

L: (Breathing heavily) ...They say... persistence... is power... but... anyway... we've confirmed that to do something about a human head, you need at least twenty-five whole cabbages. Plus, you need a bit of a knack for it. See, skulls are surprisingly hard. Hmm. In that case, I guess the spot for the ultimate weapon is decided: a washbasin full of nasty water. Well, since the author has ended up like this, there's no point in talking about it. So, now that it's just me, here's the preview.

Next time on *Slayers Special*:

- "L's Osaka Food Tour: Strange Shops You Must Visit Once"

- "Showdown! L vs. the Viperfish"
- "The Author Buys L a Villa"

...Probably.

See you next time!

(Afterword: The End)